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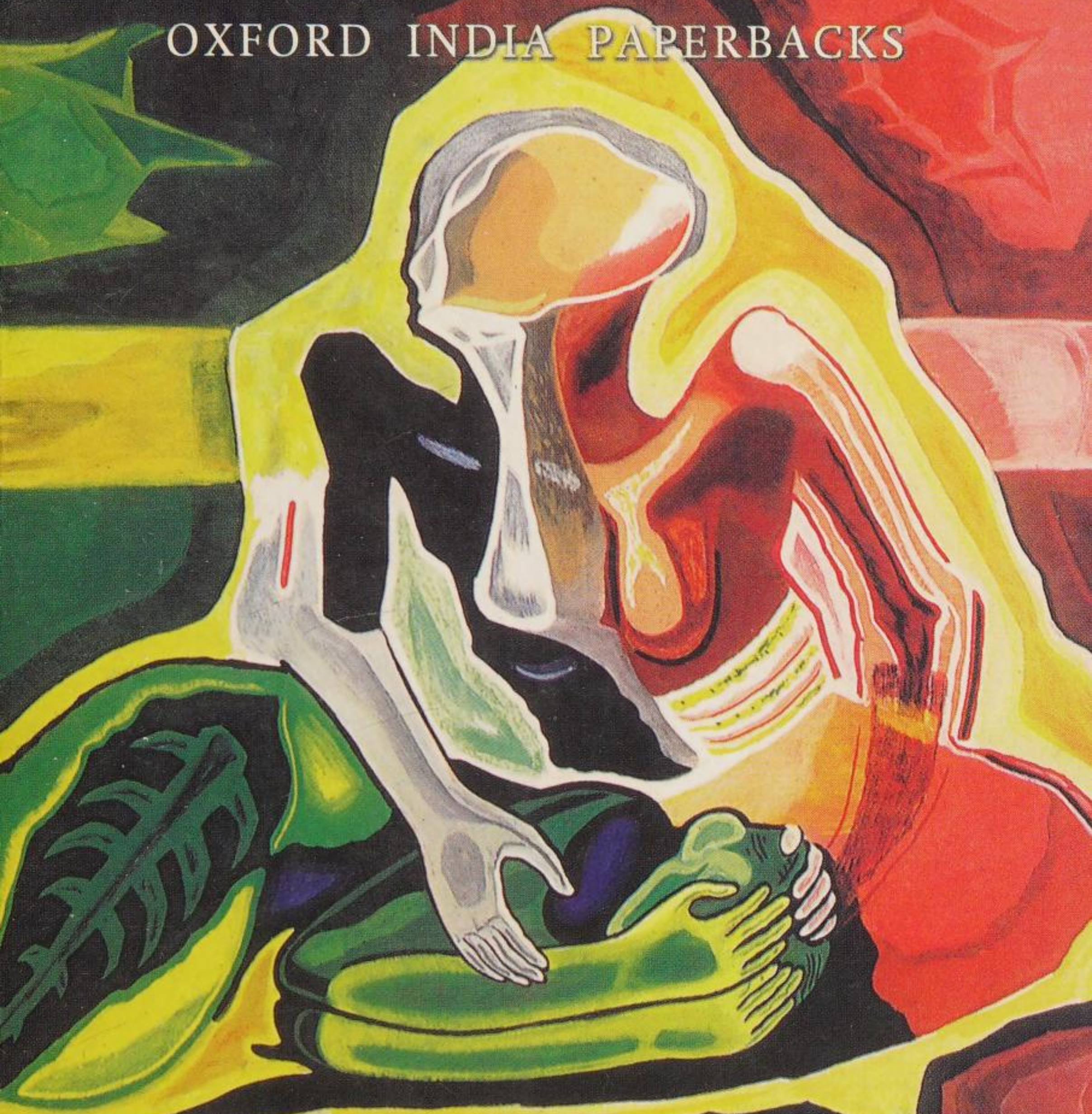


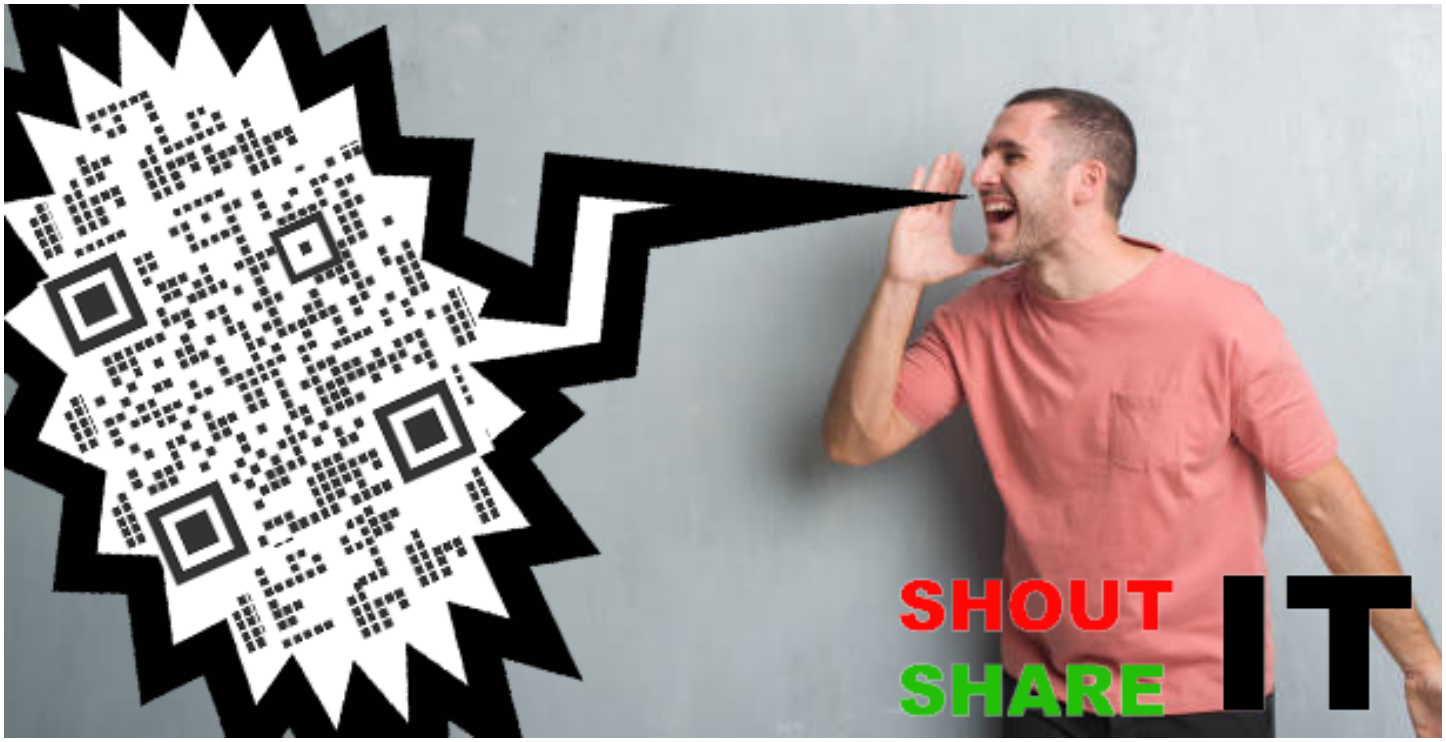
'subversive and liberating'
—*Tehelka*

SANGATI

Events

BAMA

Translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmström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SANGATI

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OXFORD
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PREFACE

After a gap of nearly ten years, the chance to read *Sangati* in English has arrived. The first edition of *Sangati* in Tamil appeared in 1994 and the second edition followed in 1995. *Sangati*, coming after *Karukku*, attracted many people. It was felt widely and often that its glowing message of self-confidence in place of self-pity was its strength as well as its voice that directly addressed what was in the heart.

The Institute of Development Education, Action and Studies (IDEAS) published both *Karukku* and *Sangati* in Tamil. I consider it my duty to once again thank my friends Rev. Mark Stephen S.J. and Rev. Michael Jeyaraj S.J. who were the moving forces behind the publication. Their great effort and support will always be silently praised.

Oppressed, ruled, and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste, and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of society to live. In *Sangati*, many strong Dalit women who had the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel themselves upwards, to roar (their defiance) changed their difficult, problem-filled lives and quickly stanched their tears. *Sangati* is a look at a part of the lives of those Dalit women who dared to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them. And through this, they found the courage to revolt.

Sangati, which has as its theme the growth, decline, culture, and liveliness of Dalit women, changed me as well. Even in times of trouble, boredom, and depression, the urge grew to demolish the troubles and to live happily. To bounce like a ball that has been hit became my deepest desire, and not to curl up and collapse because of the blow.

Today, information about Dalit women is being widely discussed in many places by many people. Mini Krishnan who edited and published the translation of *Karukku* into English (1999) approached me in 2001 for the English translation of *Sangati* through Oxford University Press. It was she who introduced my work to French publishers. It was through her that L'Aube translated *Sangati* into French (2002) and it was well received in France. Without Mini's interest, backing and hard work it can be said that *Sangati*'s present form would not have been possible. I am delighted to render my affectionate thanks to her. My gratitude also to Lakshmi Holmström who spent years translating, revising, and redrafting the English version of *Sangati* without disturbing the essence and flow of the original.

Finally, I dedicate this book to my mother and grandmother and the many Dalit women I have known from whom I draw both hope and courage.

BAMA
Uthiramerur

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

News of many events come to our ears, whether we want to listen or not. We pay attention to some of it. To much of it, we pay no heed.

We have all come across news, broadcast widely and everywhere, telling us of the position of women in our patriarchal society, and of the rights that have been plucked away from them. But news of women who have been trapped not only by patriarchy but also by caste-hatred is often sidelined, hidden, forgotten. Occasionally, we hear the sound of a few suffering women weeping. Then we forget it.

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth, and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. I was eager that through them, everyone should know about us and our lives. *Sangati* grew out of the hope that the Dalit women who read it will rise up with fervour and walk towards victory as they begin their struggle as pioneers of a new society.

Mark S.J. worked tirelessly, from beginning to end, in helping to bring out *Sangati*. He urged me to think, and helped in the writing of it, with patience, concern, and commitment.

Michael Jeyaraj S.J. not only encouraged me to write, but also provided

the facilities to write this book. He also honoured the first edition of *Sangati* by writing an introduction to it.

George Joseph S.J. is another friend who urged me to write, and encouraged me on many occasions.

Ms Clara helped by typing the manuscript very quickly and enthusiastically.

Mr Xavier produced a fine cover design, and Vijaya Printers printed the book.

Sangati is the third in the Jivanadhi series produced by the IDEAS Institute, Madurai.

I am happy to acknowledge all of them with love and gratitude.

BAMA
1994

INTRODUCTION

Although the word 'Dalit' was first used by Ambedkar in preference to his own earlier term, 'Scheduled Castes', it only gained common currency following what might be called the second wave of the Marathi Dalit movement, that is to say, with the founding of the Dalit Panthers in 1972.

In Tamil Nadu, the term had been used intermittently along with *taazhtappattor* (those who have been put down) or *odukkappattor* (the oppressed) during the eighties, but it is only since the nineties that it has been used widely, not only by Tamil Dalit writers and ideologues in order to identify themselves, but also by mainstream critics, in order to single them out. Unjairajan, editor of *Manusanga*, claims that it was in his journal in 1990 that certain works were given prominence as 'Dalit Literature', and that thenceforth the concept became accepted and widely used. The term, he writes, *arangai vittu ambalam vandadu*—left the small stage or battlefront and arrived at a public forum.[1] In 1993, the year before the Ambedkar centenary, a festival of Dalit arts was held in Pondicherry at which several critical papers were read, including Raj Gauthaman's two seminal contributions, later published together as *Dalit Panpaadu (Dalit Culture)*. In November 1994, the journal *Nirapirikai* produced a special Dalit issue, with translations from Marathi and Black American poets as well as original work by Tamil Dalits, and articles by critics such as A. Marx and Ravi Kumar. Thus the critical writing and comment has gone side by side with new writing by self-styled Dalit writers such as Idayavendan, Abhimani, Unjairajan, Vidivelli, Marku, Bama, etc. It is equally striking that mainstream critics have begun to

acknowledge this writing as radically new and different. For example, N.S. Jagannathan gives it serious consideration in his 1994 overview of Tamil literature.[2]

The word 'Dalit' coming from Marathi and meaning 'oppressed' or 'ground down', is not without problems in Tamil Nadu, but it has been appropriated for particular reasons: it does away with reference to caste, and points to a different kind of nation-wide constituency; specifically it signals the militancy of the Dalit Panthers, their broad definition of 'Dalit', and their professed hope of solidarity with all oppressed groups. ('Who are Dalits? All Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, neo-Buddhists, labourers, landless and destitute peasants, women, and all those who have been exploited politically and economically and in the name of religion are Dalits.')[3]

At the same time, Dalit ideologues such as Gauthaman and Unjairajan would claim for Tamils, not only Marathi and Kannada precedents, but also a particular Tamil history.

During the past sixty years the force of Periyaar's rationalist thought, the spread of the Dravidian Movement's ideas, and the introduction of Marxist political and economic philosophy have provided a much more opportune context in Tamil Nadu. Here, the Dalit uprising is not confined only to the expression of Dalit literature. On the contrary, Dalit literature came about as part and parcel of anti-caste struggles, agitation for reserved places in the interests of social justice, and political protests for economic equality.[4]

What is Dalit writing? Raj Gauthaman sees it as essentially subversive in character, bringing both content and forms which challenge received literary norms. In terms of content, he writes, it should set out to outrage, by choosing as subject matter, the lifestyles of Dalits, who by definition, stand outside caste-proprieties. It should offer a totally different world view to Tamil readers. 'Dalit literature describes the world differently, from a Dalit perspective. Therefore it should outrage and even repel the guardians of caste and class. It should provoke them into asking if this is indeed literature.'[5]

Gauthaman puts his argument most forcefully in regard to the use of language by Dalits. He claims that it is the stated design of Dalit

writing to disrupt received modern (upper-caste) language proprieties, and to 'expose and discredit the existing language, its grammar, its refinements, and its falsifying order as symbols of dominance' (ibid.). He adds, 'for it is according to these measures that the language of Dalits is marginalized as a vulgar and obscene language, the language of slums' (ibid.).

Here it is important to stress that traditionally, and from the earliest times, Tamil grammarians have distinguished between '*sen*-Tamil' (the literary) and '*kodun*-Tamil' (the colloquial). In modern times, the gap between the spoken and the written has been bridged to some extent. Yet the standard set by Subramanya Bharati (1882–1921), normally considered the founder of modern Tamil prose, and by the writers of fiction of the 1930s, has been based on the spoken language of an educated middle-class, upper-caste elite. This still remains largely the literary norm, in spite of the populist agenda of journalists and speakers such as C.N. Annadurai, and the increasing importance given to local language forms, particularly in reported conversation, in recent Tamil fiction. Dalit writing makes a striking departure from this norm. It goes much further in its colloquial approach. If it brings into Tamil literature subject matter hitherto considered inappropriate, it uses a language hitherto considered unprintable.

Two years after *Dalit Panpaadu*, in his introduction to Dalit writing in the *India Today Annual* of 1995, Gauthaman presents a case for the universal aspect of Dalit writing. He begins with an analysis of the achievements of Dalit literature in recent years, and it is notable that Gauthaman's critique here is descriptive rather than prescriptive. First, he says, Dalit literature has begun to bring about a change; to enable non-Dalits to deconstruct a traditional mindset which made them perceive Dalits as lower than themselves; and instead to see Dalits as equals rather than pitiful victims; 'to awaken the Dalit who lies asleep within the conscience of all people of all castes'. Second, he says, it has put forward a new and subversive ethic which not only awakens the conscience of non-Dalits, but which also fills Dalits themselves with confidence and pride. Thus, it shares its aims with other marginalized and subaltern groups worldwide;

'it is a Tamil and Indian reflection of the global literature of the oppressed whose politics must be an active one that fights for human rights, social justice, and equality.'

Thus, Dalit literature is presented by these critics as a reflection in literary and linguistic terms of a 'politics of liberation'. But it is also presented as a proud reflection of what the same critics such as Gauthaman, A. Marx, Ravi Kumar, and Unjairajan have called 'Dalit culture'. Just as Gauthaman makes a forceful plea for reclaiming and reinforcing a special Dalit Tamil usage, the playwright and critic Gunasekaran makes a strong plea for reclaiming all Dalit art forms.[6] He distinguishes between *sevviyal* (classical arts) and *naattupuraiyal* (folklore). He claims that naattupuraiyal ought properly to be divided into Dalit and non-Dalit art forms. Dalit art forms, he goes on to say, do not depend on mainstream Hinduism, nor on the Sanskritic gods, the puranic stories, nor the Sanskrit epics. They depend rather on local gods and heroes; they are closely linked to the performers' mode of employment (*tozhil*), and production of goods (*urpatti porul*). The agenda he sets for Dalit writers is to reclaim and to develop these art forms, retaining sharply and without compromising to mainstream tastes, particular Dalit features of spectacle, mask, gesture, and language. This concept of Dalit culture sets up an alternate classicism for Dalit writers, a different poetics based on oral traditions.

Who then are Dalit writers? Raj Gauthaman answers this question broadly:

> Who has the right to write about Dalits? Of course, one who is born a Dalit has that birthright. But it is also possible for Dalits to become so attuned to upper-class attitudes that they have lost their sense of themselves and may even write as enemies of Dalits. By the same token, it is possible for those who were not born as Dalits to write about Dalits if they truly perceive themselves as Dalit.[7]

Both Unjairajan[8] and Gauthaman would include among such writers Imayam (*Koveru Kazhudaigal*, 1994), Marku (*Yaatirai*, 1993), the playwright Gunasekaran, the critic A. Marx, and others who are not themselves from Dalit families, but who are not from upper-caste groups either.

Finally, Raj Gauthaman also stresses that there are no models for Dalit writing. Sequence, chronology, perceptions of time, form, and language must all be reconstructed in Dalit writing as it evolves. His primary examples of such reconstruction are Bama's *Karukku*[9] and *Sangati*.

Sangati, published in Tamil in 1994, is the second work of Bama, whose earlier work, an autobiography, *Karukku*, is now well known. The tension throughout *Karukku* is between the self and the community: the narrator leaves one community (of religious women) in order to join another (as Dalit woman). *Sangati* moves from the story of individual struggle to the perception of a community of *paraiya* women, a neighbourhood group of friends and relations and their joint struggle. In this sense, *Sangati* is perhaps the autobiography of a community.

Both *Karukku* and *Sangati* draw on autobiographical material in order to create strikingly new literary forms; they tell real-life stories of risks taken, and of challenge, choice, and change. It may be important here to make a general comment on the place of autobiographies in the development of modern writing by women in India. Tharu and Lalita, in their monumental *Women Writing in India*,[10] point to the number of autobiographies which appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, heralding the start of a modern genre of creative writing by women. They comment that many of these texts 'are a personal testimony of the new sense of worth these women experience as "individuals", whose specific lives were of interest and importance'.[11] There is a striking parallel here with the beginning of self-consciously styled Dalit writing in India, particularly in Marathi. It is also notable that Raj Gauthaman wrote, 'Dalits, who have for so long been treated as commodities owned by others must shout out their selfhood, their "I", when they rise up.'[12] Yet, in contrast with Marathi, we have seen few such autobiographies in Tamil. Hence *Karukku* and *Sangati* have a special significance.

Tharu and Lalita also point to the tension in modern autobiographic writing, between the 'life scripts that cultures provide at particular junctures

in their history', and the details of individual life which both internalize and yet struggle against these blueprints. Such a tension, in fact, is often the starting point for fictional writing; novels of quest and self-discovery. However, the blueprints for a Dalit woman and for a Christian Dalit woman are strikingly different from those which apply to upper-caste women. An examination of such blueprints and the struggle against them form the basis and structure of *Sangati*.

Sangati flouts received notions of what a novel should be, just as *Karukku* flouts the conventions of autobiography. It has no plot in the normal sense, only the powerful stories of a series of memorable protagonists. 'Sangati' means news, events, happenings, and the book is one of interconnected anecdotes. Bama makes clear her intention in her Acknowledgements in this volume:

> My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture; their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over their adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories.

These individual stories, anecdotes, memories of personal experience are narrated in the first person, then counterpointed by the generalizing comments of the grandmother and mother figures, and later still, by the author-narrator's reflections. The narrator is, in the earlier chapters at least, a young girl of about twelve, and in the last three or four chapters, a young woman; but the reflective voice is that of an adult looking back and meditating upon her experience. The reflections—which may seem didactic—are a means of bridging experience and analysis, and end with a practical call for action. The form of each chapter is therefore exploratory, and the structure of the book as a whole seeks to create a Dalit-feminist perspective.

Sangati is uniquely placed in contributing both to the Dalit movement and to the women's movement. The contributors to *Dalit Penniyam*

(Dalit Feminism)[13] point out repeatedly that the Dalit struggle has tended to forget a gender perspective. On the other side, recent gender studies in India have pointed out the diversity of women's experience, questioning the usefulness, therefore, in any kind of critical or nuanced writing, of a single category, 'woman'. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, for example, points to the instability of the notion of women's identity, and to the power imbalances which exist between different groups of woman, under the blanket notion of gender.[14] Taking this further, the Dalit feminist critic, Sharmila Rege writes,

> The Dalit Feminist Standpoint is about historically locating how all our identities are not equally powerful, and about reviewing how in different historical practices similarities between women have been ignored in an effort to underline caste-class identities, or at other times differences ignored for 'the feminist cause'.[15]

It is remarkable that, writing in the first half of the last decade, Bama was already formulating a 'Dalit feminism' which redefined 'woman' from the socio-political perspective of a Dalit, and examining caste and gender oppressions together.

On the one hand, *Sangati* teases out the way patriarchy works in the case of Dalit women. There is, in the first place, the question of economic inequality. Women are presented in *Sangati* as wage earners as much as men are, working as agricultural and building-site labourers, but earning less than men do. Yet the money that men earn is their own to spend as they please, whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family, often singly. They are also constantly vulnerable to sexual harassment and abuse in the world of work. Within the community, the power rests with men: caste-courts and churches are male-led, and rules for sexual behaviour are very different for men and women. Hard labour and economic precariousness leads to a culture of violence, and this is a theme that Bama explores boldly throughout the book. She writes of the violent treatment of women by fathers, husbands, and brothers, and she describes the violent domestic quarrels which are carried on publicly, where sometimes women fight back. She explores the psychological stresses

and strains which may be a reason for Dalit women's belief in their being possessed by spirits or *peys*.

But the other thrust of the book is the way it teases out a positive cultural identity as Dalit and woman (and also, to a lesser extent, as Christian) which can resist upper-caste and upper-class norms. So, set against the stories of hardship, there are others. These tell of rites of passage: a coming-of-age ceremony, a betrothal where gifts are made by the groom to the bride, a group wedding of five couples at church. The book is rooted in everyday happenings: of women working together, preparing and eating food, celebrating and singing, bathing and swimming. In this way, a positive picture is built up of certain freedoms which Dalit women possess: no dowry is required of them, for example; the symbols of marriage such as the *tali* do not have such a binding significance as in other communities; widows are not discriminated against, and may re-marry if they choose. Throughout the book too, Bama explores a Dalit woman's relationship to her body in terms of diet, health and safety, sexuality and notions of modesty.

In her earlier work, *Karukku*, Bama dealt mainly with casteism within the Roman Catholic church. Her focus there was the rift between the professed values of the church, and actual practice. In *Sangati*, her critique of the church is on broader lines. She touches on the question of conversion, which happened in her grandmother's time. It was only the community of *paraiya*s who became Christians, persuaded by the missionaries who offered free education to their children. Other Dalit communities remained Hindus. Bama's critique in *Sangati* is of patriarchy as well as casteism within the church: church rules, such as the one against divorce, militate against women and keep them under control; parish priests are not sympathetic towards women's individual choice of life-partners; they are given the meanest jobs in the church with the promise of a 'reward in heaven'. The underlying question here, debated on one occasion between the narrator of the book and her mother, is whether the community should have converted at all.

Sangati deals with several generations of women: the older women belonging to the narrator's grandmother Vellaiyamma *Kizhavi*'s generation

downward to the narrator's own, and the generation coming after her as she grows up. The conversations between the generations point to changing perspectives and aspirations as well as to gains and losses over the years. The more educated tend to move away, seeking different lives. With growing industries, child labour is recruited from the village. *Sangati* examines the differences between women, their different needs, the different ways in which they are subject to oppression, and their coping strategies. In the end, it is Bama's admiration for the women of her community, from the little girl Maikkanni who supports her mother and her family by working in a matchbox factory, to the old woman Sammuga Kizhavi who finds ways of ridiculing the upper-caste landlord, that shines through the book. And the ideals Bama admires and applauds in Dalit women are not the traditional Tamil 'feminine' ideals of *accham* (fear), *naanam* (shyness), *madam* (simplicity, innocence), *payirppu* (modesty), but rather, courage, fearlessness, independence, and self-esteem.

Throughout her work, Bama uses the Dalit Tamil dialect more consistently and easily than many of her contemporaries; for narration, and even argument and comment, not simply for reported speech. Besides overturning received notions of decorum and propriety, she bridges spoken and written styles consistently. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout her work, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading in Tamil. She has said that the style in which *Karukku* came out was completely spontaneous; it was only after it was written that she chose to leave it as it was, without attempting to 'correct' it, realizing that she had found her own voice and style.

In *Sangati*, though, Bama has made a further linguistic leap in reclaiming the language particular to the women of her community. If *Karukku* is told in Bama's own speaking voice, *Sangati* is in the voices of many women speaking to and addressing one another as they share the incidents of their daily lives. These voices, sometimes raised in anger or in pain as they lash out at each other, or against their oppressors, is

reported exactly. Such a language is full of expletives, quite often with explicit sexual references. Bama suggests several reasons for the violence of this language, and its sexual nature. Sometimes a sharp tongue and obscene words are a woman's only way of shaming men and escaping extreme physical violence. At other times, Bama reflects, such language may grow out of a frustrating lack of pleasurable experience. Or it might be the result of the internalizing of a patriarchy based on sexual dominance and power.

But the other aspect of this language of women is its vigour, and its closeness to proverbs, folk songs, and folklore. Vellaiyamma Kizhavi's re-telling of the stories of Esakki who becomes a pey, a spirit who possesses young women, and of the *Ayyankaachi* troupe are wonderful set-pieces in the book. A special characteristic of this language is its closeness to songs and chants. Bama writes, 'From birth to death, there are special songs and dances. And it is only the women who perform them. *Roraattu* (lullaby) to *oppaari* (dirge), it is only the women who will sing them.' Bama records a number of these. A song sung at a girl's coming-of-age, with a chorus of ululation at the end of every four lines begins:

> On a Friday morning, at earliest dawn
> she became a *pushpavati*, so the elders said–
> her mother was delighted, her father too,
> the uncles arrived, all in a row–
> (chorus of *kulavai*, ululation)

Bama also gives several examples of witty rhymes and verses made up on the spur of the moment to fit an occasion. A woman playing a dice game watches a girl grinding masala while her cross-cousin (*macchaan*) walks past. Immediately she makes up a song to tease her. Another makes up a song for her husband who is angry with her over some trifling matter:

> We dug a water-spring in the river-bed
> we cleaned our teeth together, he and I–
> Is it because I spluttered water over him
> he hasn't spoken to me for eight days?

Bama recognizes and applauds the ability of certain women in her community to undermine authority figures by ridiculing them, or playing tricks on them. In her most recent work, the collection of stories called *Kisumbukaaran*, she has developed this aspect of Dalit language even further.[16] *Kisumbu* or *kusumbu* means pranks, making mischief. Other key words in Bama's stories are *kindal panradu* or *pagadi panradu*, to ridicule or lampoon, and *nattanaitanam* or *natnatanam*, buffoonery, but also rashness or recklessness. Between them, these words cover a range of meanings: teasing or leg-pulling between comrades and friends, a sending-up or ridiculing of authority figures within the community, and then by extension, invective in defiance of upper-caste landowners. Raj Gauthaman says in his foreword to the collection, 'Their customary habit of joking and lampooning finally gives Dalits the strength to stand up courageously against caste oppression. Dalit jokes and banter (*pagadi*) lead the way to the language of insurrection (*kalaga mozhi*), and so, finally, to insurrection (*kalagam*). But the stories say this, not overtly, but very naturally and easily, with their own rhetoric.'

In their article 'Tamil Dalits in search of a literature', M. Kannan and François Gros claim that one of the factors that challenge the very idea of Dalit literature is 'the ideological, anthropological, or political trap that keeps literature out of most political writing'.[17] According to them, Dalit writing has tended to consist of testimonies rather than works of imagination, chronicles rather than artistically conceived texts, lived experiences rather than poetic experimentation, and finally, a call for action rather than the conversion of life into art. Gros and Kannan work from a polarization of 'life' and 'art', and from value judgements based on certain assumptions about what literature should be. Their authorities are French; Pierre Bourdieu, for example, or Henri Michaux.

It is just such polarizations and assumptions that Dalit writing has challenged, and shown to be irrelevant. Most Dalit writing in Tamil has tended to be fiction or poetry. Bama is among the few who bridge autobiography, fiction, polemics, and also a call for action. She has done

so deliberately and boldly, moving easily between these different elements, and bringing them together with a vivid and lively, inventive style. It is by the integrity of the whole and its power to move us that we must judge her work.

LAKSHMI HOLMSTRÖM

Notes

1. Unjairajan, 'Dalit (Thaazhtthapattor) Panpadu' in Ravikumar (ed.), *Dalit Kalai-Ilakkiyam-Arasiyal*, pp. 32–45 (Neyveli: Dalit Kalaivizha Kuzhu, 1996), p. 41.
2. N.S. Jagannathan, 'Smothered creativity' in *Indian Literature* 161 (May–June 1994), special issue on 'Tamil Writing Today', pp. 165–79.
3. From the 1972 Manifesto of the Dalit Panthers, quoted in Tamil in Gail Omvedt, 'Dalit Peenterkal, Tamil ilakkiyam, penkal' (Dalit Panthers, Tamil literature, women) in *Nirappirikai* (Pondicherry), special edition (Nov. 1994), pp. 3–7.
4. Raj Gauthaman, 'We have no need for haloes', *India Today Annual* (1995), 96–8: p. 96.
5. Raj Gauthaman, *Dalit Panpaadu* (Puduvai: Gauri Padipakam, 1993), p. 98.
6. K.A. Gunasekaran, 'Naatupura kalaigalum Dalit arangiyal pangalippum' in Ravikumar (ed.), *Dalit Kalai-Ilakkiyam-Arasiyal*, pp. 61–70 (Neyveli: Dalit Kalaivizha Kuzhu, 1996).
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Sangati

Events

CHAPTER one

'If the third is a girl to behold, your courtyard will fill with gold.' When I was born, it seems that my grandmother, Vellaiyamma quoted this proverb and rejoiced. My mother was happy enough. But she was a little disappointed that I was so dark, and didn't have my sister's or brother's colour. My mother told me that in our village, they didn't make any difference between boys and girls at birth. But as they raised them, they were more concerned about the boys than the girls. She said that's why boys went about bossing over everyone.

They used to say that it was a good thing for the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth baby, the odd-numbered one, to be a girl. So if the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth baby, the even-numbered one was a boy, it was a lucky thing, they said.

In those days, there was no hospital or anything in our village. Even now, of course, there isn't one. If there is any illness or disease, people first of all look to country medicines for a remedy. They'll go to the free government hospital in the next town only if they don't get any better. Confinement and childbirth were always at home. In our village it was my grandmother who attended every childbirth. Only the upper castes never sent for her because she was a *paraichi*.

How did *Paatti* learn to deliver babies? She had never been inside a school, not even to shelter from the rain. Somehow she knew how to do it. It seems that she could handle even the most difficult cases. It didn't matter if the umbilical cord was twisted round the baby, if the baby lay in a breech position, if it was a premature birth, or a case of twins. She

delivered the babies safely, separating mother and child, without harming either. It was she who dragged most of the children in our street out into the world. At whatever time she was sent for, she went without complaining. And she never took any money for being there. Some households, it seems, would give her betel leaves and nuts. That was all. Once she was sent for, she stayed there for the entire time, never going elsewhere, right through the labour pains, until the waters broke, the baby was born, and the placenta fell out; she went home only after the whole thing was finished. Many people liked Paatti very much because of this. They claimed she had a lucky hand. In Perumaalpatti village most people knew her well.

Vellaiyamma Kizhavi (as everyone called the old lady) was my mother's mother. My own mother never actually saw her father, Goyindan. It seems he went away when she was a three-month-old baby and never returned. My Paatti, it seems, got married when she was fourteen years old. My mother was her second child. The older one was my aunt, my *Perimma*. It seems within four years after he married, *Thaatha* disappeared.

It so happened that a *Kangani*, an agent from a tea estate in Sri Lanka, arrived just at that time to recruit a whole group of workers from our village. It was with them that Thaatha went away. But once he left, he was gone forever. He never ever came back. All the others who went with him returned within four or five months. They said they were treated like dogs over there. They said even life in our village was better than that.

Paatti was good to look at. They said that as a young woman she had been even more beautiful. She grew quite tall. She never had a grey hair, even to the day she died. When she gathered up her waist-length hair, shook it out, and tied it into a knot, she looked very striking. She had widened the holes in her ear-lobes in order to wear *paampadam* ear ornaments. But her ears drooped, empty of earrings. I never actually saw her wearing jewellery. They said that when she was young she used to wear iron earrings.

Nor did I ever see Paatti wearing a *chattai*, a sari-blouse. Apparently,

in her times, lower-caste women were not allowed to wear them. My Perimma didn't wear a chattai either. In fact, my mother started wearing one only after she got married. Paatti had a fine, robust body. She never had a day's fever or illness until the time she died. She herself never knew how old she was. If ever she was asked she used to laugh and say, making a rough guess, 'Why, I must be about seventy or eighty'.

It seems Paatti waited and waited for Goyindan to return, and at last, when there was a terrible famine, she took off her tali and sold it. After that she never wore a tali or geeli ever again. She told herself she had become a corpse without a husband, and struggled single-handedly to care for her two children.

When my mother and Perimma were little children, the Christian priests came to our village. When they promised that if our people joined their faith, their children would get a free education, it seems that all the paraiyas became Christians. None of the other communities, *pallar*, *koravar*, or *chakkiliyar* did so. All of them remained Hindus. Why on earth paraiyas alone became Christians, I don't know, but because they did so at that time; now it works out that they get no concessions from the government whatsoever.

Even though the white priests offered them a free education, the small children refused to go to school. They all went off and took up any small job they could get. At least the boys went for a short while before they stopped school. The girls didn't even do that much. They had enough to do at home anyway, carrying the babies around and doing the housework. My mother at least studied up to the fifth class. My Perimma didn't know anything.

One day Paatti was grooming my hair. She had very clear eyesight, Paatti. She'd search out even the lice born just the other day, and squash them. She'd shake out my hair thoroughly and catch every single one of the bigger lice. When she combed it through with a fine-toothed wooden lice-comb, she'd squash the nits with the snap-snap of its long teeth. She always did this without hurting me. And while she was about it, she'd

give me all the gossip of the village. On that day, a boy called Kaatturaasa went past us.

'Do you know why they named this fellow Kaatturaasa?' Paatti asked me.

'I don't know. Go on, tell me.'

When I asked her this, Paatti laughed a little, at first. Then she said, 'You know his mother, that Pachamuukipillai. She got married and became the mother of four or five children. But to this day she's always snorting and snuffling. And he's just the same as her, wandering about, wiping his nose all the time.'

'Paatti, you said you were going to tell me why he is called Kaatturaasa,' I reminded her.

'Look how I'm prattling on about something else. Yes, his mother was out one day, cutting grass for their cow. She was pregnant at that time, nearly full term. She went into labour then and there, and delivered the child straight away. She cut off the umbilical cord with the sickle she had taken with her to cut the grass, dug a hole and buried the placenta, and then walked home carrying her baby and her bundle of grass. It was only after that that they heated water and geeter and gave her a hot bath. That fellow who went by just now, he was that baby. That's why they named him *Kaatturaasa*, king of the fields.'

'So how can one have a baby all by oneself, Paatti? Why did she have to go out to work when she was just due? Couldn't she have stayed at home?'

'If they stay at home, how are they going to get any food? Even their cows and calves will die of hunger then. And anyway, it wasn't just her, more or less all the women in our street are the same. Even your mother spent all day transplanting in the western fields and then went into labour just as she was grinding the masala for the evening meal. And that is how you were born.'

Then she went on, 'We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they've finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women,

what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our very vaginas shrivel. Now run to your mother and ask her to plait your hair. Run!'

Paatti didn't know how to make a plait. That's why she sent me off to my mother after having picked the lice.

As Paatti said, though, it is quite true that the women in our street led hard lives. That's how it is from the time that they are very little. When they are infants in arms, they never let the boy babies cry. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls. Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breast-fed longer. With girls, they wean them quickly, making them forget the breast. If the boys catch an illness or a fever, they will run around and nurse them with the greatest care. If it's a girl, they'll do it half-heartedly.

It's the same when the children are a bit older, as well. Boys are given more respect. They'll eat as much as they wish and run off to play. As for the girls, they must stay at home and keep on working all the time, cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes, and so on. When all this is done, they will carry the tiny babies, minding them even when they go out to play.

When they are playing too, girls must not play boys' games. The boys won't allow the girls to join in. Girls can play at cooking or getting married; they can play games with stones and shells such as *thattaangal* or *thaayam*. But if they go and play boys' games like *kabadi* or marbles or *chellaangucchi*, they'll get roundly abused. People will say, 'Who does she think she is? She's just like a donkey, look. Look at the way she plays boys' games.'

My Paatti too was no exception in all this. She cared for her grandsons much more than she cared for us. If she brought anything home when she returned from work, it was always the grandsons she called first. If she brought cucumbers, she scooped out all the seeds with her finger-nails, since she had no teeth, and gave them the remaining fruit. If she brought mangoes, we only got the skin, the stones and such; she gave

the best pieces of fruit to the boys. Because we had no other way out, we picked up and ate the leftover skins.

Paatti brought up and cared for her children by working as a *kothachi*, they say. This means that she had to go to the big landowners, ask them what sort of labour they needed in their fields, allocate the work among the women in our streets, and then go to work herself. Then in the evening she had to collect all the wages and distribute them. Because all the landowners belonged to the upper castes, their houses were at a great distance from our streets. Although she only needed to check once in the morning what sort of labour was needed, and then go back once in the evening to collect the wages, they used to make her walk up and down ten times a day, like a dog.

Paatti kept a buffalo and a cow, both of which gave milk. Often when she went to pull up grass for the animals, or to gather firewood, she took me along with her. She always chattered on about all sorts of things during these times.

Once when we were out gathering firewood, she told me, 'Women should never come on their own to these parts. If upper-caste fellows clap eyes on you, you're finished. They'll drag you off and rape you, that's for sure. If you go on a little further, there will be escaped criminals lurking in the plantations. They keep themselves well hidden. You must never let them see you either.'

When Paatti told me this, I was very frightened. I was thirteen at the time, and studying in the eighth class.

'Aren't you scared yourself, Paatti? Come, let's go home,' I begged her.

'Look, there are two of us, aren't there? We'll gather firewood a little longer, and then go back. You're frightened because you are only a little girl. Do you know how many times I've gone alone to collect grass?'

'But aren't you scared at such times, Paatti? What would you do if a *poochandi* or a thief came at you?'

When I asked her this, she replied, as she tied up all the firewood we had gathered with string, 'You don't know anything about me, really. Even the people of our street don't know me. I'm an *orutthankai pattini*,

I've slept with only one man. I won't allow any other fellow anywhere near me. They don't know this, those whores of the paraiya street who say all sorts of things about me, curse them! Wicked sluts, they can only say it behind my arse. Just ask them to say it to my face!' She picked up the bundle and we walked home.

Two days later, Paatti came to our house and said to my mother, 'Sevathi, tell this child Pathima to wear a half-sari from now on. It doesn't look good for her to be sitting in a class with boys when her breasts have grown as big as *kilaikkai* pods. Yesterday when I was buying broken rice at the shop, her teacher—you know that Lourdes Raj teacher, di—called me aside and said, tell your granddaughter Pathima to come to school wearing a *davani*. And then off he went.'

When I heard what Paatti said, I retorted, 'I won't wear a davani. All the boys will tease me terribly. I'll only wear a davani when I go to the ninth class.'

Paatti ticked me off bluntly. 'You don't know anything, di. Look at that fellow. Instead of teaching the pack of you, he looks at you from the corner of his eye, and then comes to me with his advice. Just wear a davani and go.'

Although I really wanted to wear a davani, I felt shy as well. I kept thinking and wondering what it would feel like to wear one (a half-sari).

Meanwhile, Paatti and Amma chatted with each other. Paatti said, 'Just see whether she doesn't come of age in two, three months. Have you noticed the bloom on her face? As soon as she gets her periods, you stop her from studying, hand her over to some fellow or the other, and be at peace.'

'Her father won't allow her to stop off now. He wants her to study at least to the tenth. He says, we didn't learn anything, and so we go to ruin. He says, let them at least get on in the world.'

Paatti was furious at this. 'Have you any idea what that will mean? How are you going to keep a virgin girl at home and not get her married? Everyone will tittle-tattle about it. Keeping young women at home is

like keeping a fire going in your belly. How long will you protect her, tell me? In my day, girls were married off even before they came of age. Guruvamma's children all came of age only a couple of years after they married.'

At this point, I asked, 'When did you get my mother married, Paatti?'

'Your Amma stayed at home four or five months after she came of age. It wasn't like that with your Perimma. I caught hold of her and gave her away immediately. Poor girl, she didn't want it. That fellow from Mossulupatti kept insisting and wouldn't take no for an answer. I couldn't take his pestering anymore, and finished it all off smartly. And then, what sort of life did she have, married to him? Poor wretch, she had seven, eight babies in a row, and then closed her eyes.'

'How did Perimma die, then, Paatti?'

'I reared a parrot and then handed it over to be mauled by a cat. Your *Periappan* actually beat her to death. My womb, which gave birth to her, is still on fire. He killed her so outrageously, the bastard. I give you my word on this. You just wait and see. Heaven alone knows what kind of death he'll die.'

'But why did he beat her, Paatti?'

Before I could finish, she began to shout in a fury, 'You ask me why? Because the man was crazy with lust. Because he wanted her every single day. How could she agree to his frenzy after she worked all hours of the day and night, inside the house and out? He is an animal, that fellow. When she refused, he practically broke her in half. Once in my very presence he hit her with the rice-pounder. May his hand be bitten by a snake!'

'And you just stood there watching! Why didn't you go and shove him off?'

'You are talking like a silly child. When a man is hitting out like that, can a woman go and pull him away? And was she born alongside four or five brothers who could have helped her? There was not a soul to support her or speak up for her. Not even her own father. Who was there to question the man? Even if the bystanders had tried to stop him, he would have shouted at all of them, "She is my wife, I can beat her or

even kill her if I want." Tell me, who could have stopped him? When she died, her last child, Seyakkodi, was only four months old. She left behind that innocent infant who was still suckling, and was gone.'

'So who looked after Seyakkodi, then?'

'It was her two elder sisters who brought her up. The older one would cook a little *kanji*. The younger one carried her about, meanwhile. Every now and then I went and saw to them.'

Right at that moment, Seyakkodi came to our house. 'Ei, Paatti, Akka wants you,' she announced, and took her away immediately.

Seyakkodi was about five or six at that time. She never went to school, but stayed at home and did the housework. Her elder sister was more than sixteen then. But she still hadn't come of age. People in the village gossiped about her and said she would never ever menstruate. Paatti was very distressed by this.

One day, my Paatti and Amma discussed it between themselves.

'Mariamma is getting quite old, but even now she hasn't developed breasts or anything. People say all sorts of terrible things just because she hasn't come of age. That girl took on too much when she was so little, that's why she has wasted away.'

When Paatti said this, my mother replied, 'Well, Amma, why don't you take her to the hospital in town and talk to the white nuns there? They say there are medicines and tonics which will help her come of age. The nuns in our village say so. Why don't you take her there and see what happens.'

'Here I am half-blind and ignorant. Where will I go and find out about all this? Yes, I should take her to the hospital one day. Her father won't do anything for her. It's enough for him to have a full stomach; he goes his own way. What sort of home can it be, without a woman to look after them?'

I wheedled her then, 'Ei, Paatti, let me come too, when you take Mariamma there.'

'Why must I take you? Do I have to pay and buy trouble?' And Paatti went away to her own house.

Some days later, Paatti came to our house after taking Mariamma to the hospital.

'Paatti, how come you managed to find the right bus to get there and back?' I asked her.

Paatti laughed and said, 'You know that some of the ladies from our village go to town every day. I just followed on after them.' Then she added, 'These ladies are all upper-caste folk. When you look at them, each one is like a Mahalakshmi, a goddess. Every time you look at them, their hair is sleek with oil and they are wearing fresh flowers. They don't just buy a small amount on Sundays and holidays like we do. They get their supply of pure oil straight from the oil press, and can rub it into their scalps every day. It takes a whole hour just to plait their hair, you know.'

'I asked you how you got to the hospital, and you're telling me something else. Well, what did they say about Mariamma?'

'After they looked into her eyes and examined her tongue and everything, what they said was that she doesn't have enough blood. They said that if she doesn't have a proper supply of blood in her body, how can she come of age? So they gave her an injection, and some tonic to take, and sent us away saying she must try it for two, three months and then go back and see them.'

She went on, 'If you go to town, you'll see a huge number of vehicles. So many of them, I can't tell you. And in all those buses and cars, there are people coming and going. God knows where all those crowds are going or coming from. And do you think they just walk along quietly? No, they are always buying and eating something or the other, as if it is a festival day. And the shopkeepers! How many goods they bring and sell!'

We sat around and listened to her in wonder.

'Ei, Sevathi, do you know something else? Those European nuns in the hospital are as white as anything. God knows what they eat, to make them look like that. They look good enough to eat, piece by piece.'

My mother said, 'What is so wonderful about them anyway? We

too have white priests and nuns here, in our own village. Haven't you seen them at church, every Sunday?'

'That's not what I'm talking about, di. What I'm saying is, it's not just the nuns who look like that. Even the pigs they keep there are as white as anything. You get such a surprise when you see them.'

At this, one of the women there, Maadathi, muttered sarcastically, 'This Vellaiyamma Kizhavi should realize that even when you tell lies, you should tell them in moderation. She seems to think we are all just stupid cunts here.'

Paatti was furious. 'Ei, you useless corpse of a woman, I'm telling you about what I saw with my own eyes. You seem to think that you know everything. Just ask my granddaughter, Mariamma, if you like. When we saw the pigs, we could hardly move this way or that. They've got so huge and fat, it's unbelievable. You think these are just ordinary pigs, do you? It seems they are all foreign. And do you think they wander about eating shit like our pigs do? No, these are reared on wheat and milk-powder and biscuits. Then why won't they be white and not coal-black like ours?'

When Paatti said this, we gazed at her in astonishment as if we were staring at foreign pigs.

After a while, Maadathi said, 'Here we are, working away like dogs before we can afford to buy wheat and milk-powder from the priests, and look at the good luck that falls upon those pigs!'

When I heard all this, I begged Paatti again, 'Ei Paatti, why don't you take me with you, just once?'

Paatti answered hotly, 'Go and ask your father. He goes about everywhere as if he is a young fellow who isn't married. Why can't he take his wife and children around and show them a few places?'

'My Ayya won't take me anywhere, Paatti. If at all, it's my elder brother who will do that. If I ask Ayya, he says young girls mustn't wander about here and there.'

'Yes, these fellows are like that, stubborn donkeys! They don't even allow us to go to the cinema that's right here. If we go out at all, it's only to the church, and even for that you have to try really hard. All the same,

if you look at it in one way, what these men say makes sense too. Can we go about as freely as they do, after all? Some wicked fellow or other is waiting to rape us.' Paatti got up, shook out her sari and tucked it tightly around herself, and then walked off.

Even after all the pills and the medicines, Mariamma still did not come of age. Everyone who met Paatti began to pester her, 'Well, Vellaiyamma, it seems that even though you gave her medicines from the town hospital, your granddaughter still hasn't got her periods?'

Suddenly, Kaliamma from South Street came up with an idea. 'Look, *Athai*, it seems that in this town called Maduragiri, there's a *pujaari*. If he says a *mantram* over a lucky charm, and then ties it round their wrist, it seems barren women conceive, and girls who haven't come of age get their periods. Why don't you take your grandchild to him?'

Paatti was keen to give it a try. But Regina, from the house opposite, came and said, 'Just last week our priest preached that once you've joined the faith, it's a mortal sin to go to pujaaris and ask for spells. He frightened us saying you'll definitely go to hell forever.'

This really terrified Paatti.

But then, Kaliamma retorted, 'It's not like that at all, Athai. Are all the people who go and ask for those mantrams, crazy or what? Forget what this woman says. She'll go to hell herself for the bad language she has just used. But all the same, if you feel worried about it, you can always go to confession after you've been to the pujaari, get a pardon, and take communion. You just go and do what you want and never mind her.'

Encouraged by this, Paatti decided to go to Maduragiri sometime on Tuesday the following week. But before that, early on Monday morning, at cock-crow, Mariamma came of age.

CHAPTER two

In our street, when a young girl came of age, they made a little hut-like room inside the house, with palmyra fronds, and got her to sit there for sixteen days. During this time, the girl didn't go out to do any work, nor did she do any sort of tasks inside the house. The relatives took turns to cook a meal for her each day. They also brought her all kinds of sweets to eat.

During the time she was confined to this *kuchulu*, she had to rub herself with turmeric and have a bath every day; wear a freshly washed sari; and eat rice mixed with gingelly oil at mealtimes. We younger children would join together and keep on peeking inside the kuchulu. Other young women came to visit, and to whisper and gossip. Every now and again, they would go off into fits of giggles.

The girl who had just come of age played all sorts of games on the floor, like *pallaanguzhi*, thaayam, or thattaangal with the other young women. For the entire time during those sixteen days, she had to hold a small iron rod or something made of iron in her hands. It was most important for her to take it along when she went outside for 'number one' or 'number two'. They said that an evil spirit, a pey, might jump on her otherwise.

The evening of the day that she first menstruated, when the women returned home from work, they gathered together to give her a bath. The girl's mother would have gone round to all the relations, earlier, to give them the news. At evening time, four women would hold out a sari, forming a curtain on all four sides, and with the girl sitting in their midst, they would pour water over her in turn. When she had been rubbed

with turmeric and bathed, then dressed in a clean sari, she would come and sit quietly in the kuchulu. And while they bathed her, the women usually sang songs with choruses of ululations. On the sixteenth day, the kuchulu was taken apart and burnt, and the girl came out, and went to work once again.

Those who were a little bit better off set up a small pandal decorated with banana trees in front of the house on the sixteenth day; hired a loudspeaker, and celebrated the occasion in a grand style, with presentations of money. The girl's mother's brother's family had to donate a sari and *ravikkai*, and big cooking vessels, *anda*s and *gunda*s. The other relations too came along with food and utensils. All these gifts for the girl, the *siir* gifts, were carried on the head in procession, street by street, lit by petromax lamps and accompanied by the beating of drums. When they saw the procession, people would talk about the size of the siir gifts, and wonder whose daughter was getting all this. And when there was a similar ritual in the houses of the people who gave the siir gifts, they expected an equal amount of gifts in return. Otherwise there would be complaints and fights. Apparently all this is very recent. In my Paatti's time, she said, there never was all this show and festivity.

Paatti felt sad that when Mariamma came of age, we weren't able to do anything special for her.

'She sat inside the kuchulu for eight days, just for the show. Your mother cooked for her for a couple of days, and put twenty rupees and a couple of measures of rice in her hands. After that, my uncle's children cooked for four more days. What can they afford, after all, poor things; they served her drumstick greens, and rasam, and a salt fish gravy.'

'But why did you let it go without any rites or rituals for her, Paatti?' I asked.

'Do you think it's an easy thing to do, to keep these rituals? If you have a few coins in hand you can do it all. She herself pulled down the kuchulu on the eighth day, burnt it, and set off for work. Her mother went and died. Her father is a drunkard and goes off to his kept woman. He couldn't care less for his children! He's satisfied so long as his stomach is full.'

'Well, all right. But you said they used to sing and raise a kulavai to the girl. Do you remember that song, Paatti?'

'Even if there's no kanji to eat, the women can never be stopped from singing loudly and ululating,' Paatti said, as she began to sing:

On Friday morning, at day-break
She came of age, the people said.
Her mother was delighted, her father too—
Her uncles arrived, all in a row—

Opened the cloth-shop and chose silk and gold
Went upstairs to find the silk of their dreams
The lower border with a row of swans
The upper border with a row of clouds.

The mountain wind can touch her if she bathes in the river
The chill wind can touch her if she bathes in the pond.
So bathe her in water that is drawn from the well
And wash her hair in a tub made of illuppai flowers.

Shake her hair dry and comb it with gold,
Toss her hair dry and comb it with silver,
Comb her hair dry with a golden comb,
And women, all together, raise a kulavai.

'After every four lines there was a kulavai, an ululation,' Paatti said. Then she added sorrowfully, 'Daughter of a wretch, what good did it do her to come of age and become a *pushpavati*? The very next week she fell ill and took to her bed.'

After they pulled down the kuchulu and burnt it, Mariamma heard that the builders who were digging wells in those parts gave good wages. And so she went to work for them. Only youths and young girls were suited to that work. Even though it meant hard labour, the youngsters went to work there hoping to pick up a few coins which would help to fill their bellies.

In this kind of work, the men climbed right inside the well, dug out

the sides, and filled baskets with stone and rubble. The women had to go down, carry the baskets on their heads, bring them up and tip them out. It was the men's job to blow up the rocks with dynamite, dig out the well, and build up its walls with cement. So they got the bigger wages. The women, in any case, whatever work they did, were paid less than the men. Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles, but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price.

Anyway, one day Mariamma was carrying away a basket of rubble like this when her foot slipped and she fell all the way down, basket and all. How she fell into such a deep well and still managed to survive was a miracle. There were no great wounds to her head, but every bone in her body seemed to be crushed. They just rolled her into a palmyra mat, put her in a bullock cart, drove her to the free government hospital in the next town and admitted her there.

As soon as we heard the news we all rushed there. Even Paatti came with us. There wasn't a single one of us who didn't weep when we saw her. You could only see Mariamma's face. From her neck to her feet she was covered in plaster. She lay there unable even to roll from side to side. They told us that it would take at least a year for her to get up and walk about.

After we visited Mariamma, we walked home along a path through the fields, talking amongst ourselves. Paatti said, 'This reminds me of a young fellow, just two weeks married, who was working on a well. He was blown up when they were laying the dynamite, and died, poor man. Then there was the other man who was lifting water from a well with a leather bucket, when the bullocks went mad, dragged him round and pushed him in. He was beaten about the face and head, and he too died.'

'Even last year, a couple of kids—both of them young girls—were helping to sow the fields with gram. They ate some of the gram, became violently sick, and then died.'

When Paatti said this, I questioned her, 'How can people die from eating gram?'

'Of course they won't die if they eat ordinary, plain gram. These landowners had mixed the seed-gram with all sorts of chemicals. Who knows, they might even have done it on purpose to stop the girls from eating the gram. At least they could have warned the girls, right in the beginning. And as for the poor fools, they should have stopped themselves because of the chemical smell. Instead they went and ate the gram on empty stomachs, they hadn't had anything else to eat or drink that morning. They threw up violently, and lay down right there in the fields. Our people found them there when they went to start the ploughing, and brought them to this same hospital. That very evening they both died, and were brought home and buried. At least if you die a natural death you can hope to be buried with your whole body. If you die in hospital, it seems they cut out the brains and the kidney and the liver, stitch up everything with just the guts inside, and return the body tied up in a mat.'

We walked home for three miles, along the path through the fields. Suddenly there was a terrifying noise from somewhere. I was so frightened, even my insides were trembling. Paatti told me that there were jackals howling in the distance.

Mariamma lay in her hospital bed, helpless and suffering for seven or eight months. Then at last she came home.

After a few days, she set out again to find work. Her younger sister Annamma too was ready to go with her. So the two of them found work in the fields, weeding or harvesting. When they couldn't get any of this seasonal work, they went into the hills and woods, gathered firewood, sold their bundles, and earned enough for their daily kanji.

One day Mariamma gathered her firewood as usual, and came home in the burning heat carrying her bundle. Bare feet; no chappals or anything. The loose earth lying along the paths was scorching, so she leaned her bundle against a banyan tree and sat down to rest for a moment. Then she saw that there was water running through an irrigation pump-set nearby, and went to drink a couple of mouthfuls of water. She happened

to be in Kumarasami Ayya's fields. The man was actually in the pump-set shed at that time. When she went innocently to get some water, he seized her hand and pulled her inside. Frightened out of her wits, she left everything and ran home, hardly knowing how she escaped.

When she came home and told her friends, they warned her. 'Mariamma,' they said, 'it is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you'll find that it is you who will get the blame; it's you who will be called a whore. Just come with us quietly, and we'll bring away the firewood that you left there. Hereafter, never come back on your own when you have been collecting firewood. That landowner is an evil man, fat with money. He's upper caste as well. How can we even try to stand up to such people? Are people going to believe their words or ours?' And so they went together, picked up the bundle of firewood, sold it, and then went home.

By this time, Kumarasami Ayya, afraid that his reputation might be in ruins, hurried to the village, and went and complained to the headman of the paraiya community, the *naattaamai*.

'The way some of the youngsters from your streets carry on when they go out to gather firewood is beyond everything. They always come and lurk along my fields. I've been watching them for a long time, and really I have to speak out now. Just today that girl Mariamma, daughter of Samudrakani, and that Muukkayi's grandson Manikkam were behaving in a very dirty way; I saw them with my own eyes. And it's a good thing it was I who saw them. I've come straight away to tell you. Had it been anybody else who saw them, they would have been in bad trouble. Anyone else would have strung them up hand and foot to the banyan tree, then and there. You would have been told about it only after that.'

Soon after his encounter with Mariamma, the landowner had seen the lad Manikkam walking along with the firewood he had gathered; so now he found a way of shielding his own name by throwing them both in the fire, in front of the naattaamai.

Our headman replied to the *mudalaali*, 'Ayya, this very evening we'll

call a meeting of the village folk and enquire into it.' So he sent out an announcement with a tom-tom, and summoned everyone to a meeting that night.

All our menfolk gathered in front of the community hall, and sat down. The women stood about, behind them, here and there, watching.

The naattaamai sent word for Mariamma and Manikkam to be brought in front of him. The junior naattaamai, the senior naattaamai, all the older men of the village, the youths and even the little boys were all seated there.

'Silence, everyone. Here is a case where our entire community's reputation is at risk. In a village where there are many caste-communities, if someone of our caste behaves disgracefully, then it brings shame on all of us. As it is, we paraiyas are treated with contempt. And now this happens. The junior naattaamai will explain everything in detail. Tell those two to come up here in front of everyone.' The senior naattaamai, Seeniappan, turned and looked at the junior naattaamai, Chellakkannu.

As soon as the senior naattaamai began to speak, everyone shut up, and there was total silence. The women even quietened the babies, settled them in their arms, and stood still, wondering what was going to happen. Mariamma and Manikkam came to the centre of the circle, greeted the elders by falling down and prostrating themselves at full length, and went to stand each to one side, arms folded.

Then the junior naattaamai, Chellakkannu, began to speak. By now there was a ripple of murmurs from the women. Each woman was telling the next why she thought the meeting was called, embroidering it with what she knew. At once, a couple of young men got up and came towards us saying, 'Do you women have any sense at all? What are you muttering about here, when we men are talking seriously? Go home all of you.' They added a couple of obscenities, scolded us roundly and drove us off. We ran for a short distance, pretending we were going home, then came back in a little while to watch and listen.

'This evening, I was buying cattle-feed in Maangamanda Chettiar's store, and talking to two or three other men there. The mudalaali living in the last house called me and said he wanted to talk to me and to the

senior naattaamai. It was I who sent a man to bring the senior naattaamai there.'

The junior naattaamai was silent for a while, gazing at the men who were gathered there. He took the cloth off his shoulder, wiped his face, replaced the cloth and went on, 'Today, Mariamma, Samudrakani's daughter, who had been out gathering firewood, and Manikkam, son of East Street Chellayya, and grandson of Muukkayi, left their firewood leaning against the banyan tree and went together in secret to the pump-set shed belonging to Kumarasami Mudalaali. It happened that the mudalaali came that side on an errand, and saw them there together, behaving indecently. As soon as they saw him, they screamed and took to their heels like frightened donkeys. Ayya, who saw them there with his own eyes, came to us directly, and left the matter in our hands. Had it been anyone else, there would have been a different end to this story.'

When the junior naattaamai finished, everyone began muttering to each other.

'What's the use if you just talk amongst yourselves?' the senior naattaamai scolded. 'We have to decide together what we should do now.'

At this point Karuppayya said, 'Both the youngsters are standing right here, aren't they? Why don't we question them first?'

'Question them? Why should we question them? Didn't the mudalaali see them with his own eyes and then come and complain? We have to decide what their punishment should be, that's all.' Malayaandi's voice was raised in anger.

Immediately, four or five people shouted together, 'How can that be? If the mudalaali says something, that's it, is it? We can only know what really happened if we ask these youngsters a couple of questions.'

'All right, all right. No need to shout. Let's ask them then.' The senior naattaamai quietened the crowd. Then he asked in an accusing tone, 'Ele, Manikkam, what do you have to say for yourself, le?'

Manikkam folded his arms as he stood there, and spoke humbly. 'What the mudalaali said never happened. That girl came away with her firewood bundle quite some time before I did. We spoke a few words in fun when we were in the woods. And that was when everyone was there together.

I only joked with her because she is my athai's daughter. I never even saw her along the way, on my way back.'

'Eitha, Mariamma, what do you say?'

'What that machaan says is true. When I was gathering firewood with a few others, he said a word or two to me, in fun. I came away before the others. I don't even know when the others left.' If Mariamma had said anymore, she would have burst into tears. She finished speaking, wiped her face with her sari, and stood there, her head drooping.

'In that case, did the mudalaali lie to us in everything he said? You two had better be respectful, admit the truth and beg pardon. Otherwise we have no other way but to punish you severely.' The senior naattaamai's voice rose again, in warning.

From the group of women, Kaliamma said, as if she was speaking to herself, 'That akka Mariamma went away with her firewood a long time before all the rest of us. Machaan Manikkam helped to lift my bundle on to my head, and then walked home behind me. How could these two possibly have met and misbehaved? This is really unjust. Look at the cheek of the mudalaali. He came here as fast as he could and told his fibs.'

Even as she was saying this, four or five of the men got up once again and shouted at us. 'Will you she-donkeys get out of here or do we have to stamp on you? The more we drive the wretches away, the more they come back and make trouble.'

Once again the women were silenced.

The junior naattaamai called out Mariamma's father, Samudrakani. 'Look here, 'pa, Samudran, tell your daughter to fall down and beg forgiveness. The village will forgive her and make her pay a small fine of ten or twenty rupees, and that will be the end of the matter. If not, tell me, can you pay off a really big fine?'

Samudrakani listened to this, went up close to his daughter and said, 'Well girl, you heard what he said, didn't you? Why are you standing there like a stone then? Beg forgiveness, you bitch, I have suffered enough shame because of you.' He stared at her in fury.

'Ayya, I never did any of that. It was the mudalaali who tried to

misbehave with me. But I escaped from him and ran away.' She began to weep loudly.

At once some of the men at the meeting began to shout once more. 'Do you hear that? Slut of a girl! In order to get out of it, she promptly sticks all the blame on the mudalaali. These creatures will come and dig out your eyes even when you are awake.'

Then they told the naattaamai, 'Maama, there's no use questioning her. Just decide how much to fine her. It's only that way we can stop these girls from acting like whores.'

Half the people there agreed. Nobody spoke much after that. But the women continued to mutter amongst themselves.

Anandamma said, 'It was the mudalaali who tried to rape her. She was scared out of her wits, refused him, and ran away. Now the whore-son has turned everything round and told a different tale. I actually went with her that evening to fetch the firewood that she left behind.'

'What can you say to these men,' Susaiamma replied, sadly. 'There's no way of convincing them of the truth, even when we are sure of it. They never allow us to sit down at the village meetings. They won't even allow us to stand to one side, like this. But it's only to us that they'll brag. Ask them just to stand up to the mudalaali. Not a bit, they'll cover their mouths and their backsides and run scared.'

But Muthamma disagreed. 'You seem to know such a lot. Her own father keeps a mistress, everyone knows that. She could be a bit of a slut herself. Just last week when we were weeding the sesame fields, she was ready to fight with me. She might have done it, who knows?'

'Everybody in the village knows about her father's kept woman, even a baby who was born just the other day. Did anyone call a village meeting and question him about it? They say he's a man: if he sees mud he'll step into it; if he sees water, he'll wash himself. It's one justice for men and quite another for women.'

While they were arguing amongst themselves like this, some of the men came up yet again, scolded them, struck at them with their shoulder cloths and drove them off.

Meanwhile, Mariamma's father stood next to her saying, 'What's

the good of standing there like a boundary stone? You should have used your sense before it came to this. Now fall on your knees immediately and beg forgiveness.'

But Mariamma kept on standing there as if she were dead; as if she felt nothing. She didn't say a word.

Her father got angrier still and began hitting her as hard as he could. Even then she stood still, in a state of shock. Still she didn't speak.

'Stubborn slut! Look how she won't move, however much she is told!'

'She goes and does as she likes and now she won't move even when all of us tell her. Doesn't show any respect.'

A woman spoke again. 'They are making this poor girl suffer so much, but do they beat that boy, Manikkam? And none of them has the brains to find out whether it wasn't the mudalaali who was doing wrong in the first place.'

Chinnathayi who stood next to her said, 'That's a good one! Suppose these fellows go and question upper-caste men. What if those rich men start a fight, saying, how dare these paraiyar be so insolent? Who do you think is going to win? Even if the mudalaali was really at fault, it is better to keep quiet about it and fine these two eighty or a hundred. Instead you want to start a riot in the village. Once before, there was a fight in the cremation ground and these upper-caste men set the police on us. We were beaten to a pulp. Don't you remember?'

Seeniamma agreed. 'That's very true. We have to think about all this before we do anything. After all, our men know what they are doing, don't they?'

The naattaamai began to speak. At once, Savuriamma scolded her baby who was sucking at her breast and whining. 'Shut up, devil of a child, let me hear what they are saying.' Settling the child more comfortably as she stood there, she went on, 'As far as I know, this is the first case of sexual misbehaviour that has come before the village meeting. The landowners get up to all sorts of evil in the fields. Can we bring them to justice, though? After all, we have to go crawling to them tomorrow and beg for work.'

When Mariamma saw her father advancing towards her to beat her again, she was so terrified that she fell down at last and asked for forgiveness. Nobody asked Manikkam to prostrate himself. After this, Mariamma was asked to pay a fine of Rs 200, and Manikkam a fine of Rs 100.

The naattaamai finished the proceedings by saying, 'It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies.'

Manikkam's father paid Rs 50 straight away, and brought a big brass vessel as guarantee for the rest of the money he owed. When he paid off the remaining fifty rupees, he would be able to retrieve the vessel. When people didn't have ready cash in hand, they often resorted to this ploy.

Poor Mariamma, having fallen into the well and been almost crippled, had only just emerged from hospital. She didn't even have a paisa in hand. Her father sent the younger daughter Annamma home to fetch a big brass vessel and a brass water pot. He handed over both to the naattaamai.

After this, the crowd broke up and everyone went home. As we were walking home, Arokkyam said, 'Look how unfair these fines are. Even last week, when my granddaughter Paralokam went to pull up grass for the cow, the owner of the fields said he would help her lift the bundle on to her head. That was his excuse for squeezing her breasts, the barbarian. He's supposed to be the mudalaali's son. He's supposed to be an educated fellow. The poor child came and told me and wept. But say we dared to tell anyone else about it. It's my granddaughter who'll be called a whore and punished. Whatever a man does, in the end the blame falls on the woman.'

Our Paatti was furious. She kept on railing at Mariamma. 'When the fellow pulled you into the shed, why couldn't you have kicked him in the balls then and there? Now you've been hauled unfairly in front of the whole village, given a bad name, and made to pay a fine, to top it all.

Now how on earth are you going to save the money, and when will you redeem the vessel and the water pot? All right, leave it now. Of course your father had an eye on the water pot and the vessel for himself. He was waiting for a chance to sell them off and put the money into the toddy-shop owner Maariappa's hands. Let's see what he does now. All right, all right, go to sleep now.'

But Mariamma didn't sleep a wink that night. She even thought that it might be best to hang herself with a rope. She sat and wept all night long. Her little sister, Annamma, tried to comfort her by saying, 'Don't cry, Akka. Please don't cry.' Their youngest sister, Seyakkodi, sat up in bed and began to whimper. At this, Mariamma patted her to sleep, and lay down at last. She continued to weep as she lay there.

CHAPTER three

I could never forget the way Mariamma was humiliated in front of the entire village. The more I thought about it, the more I felt sorry for her. And although I was filled with pity on the one hand, I was filled with anger on the other. If only they had allowed the other women who had gone to collect firewood with her to speak out at the assembly, all the lies and all the truth would have come out. Why were women pushed aside always and everywhere? The question kept on churning inside me.

Paatti could have spoken out at the village council: after all, she was present at most households whenever a child was born; she was an overseer of women workers; she was an important woman. It was the smaller children and young girls who could not be expected to speak out. Telling myself this, I accosted Paatti. 'Paatti,' I said, 'after all, you are a big woman in this village, why couldn't you have gone and spoken the truth that day?'

Paatti went on crushing betel nuts in the mortar with an iron pestle, as she answered me, 'You talk as if it's all a game. Big woman, small woman, nonsense! Once you are born a woman, can you go and confront a group of four and five men? Should you even do it? When we were little ones, if ever there was a village meeting, we just stayed inside our homes and drank our kanji. But just look at what goes on nowadays. Even small children and young girls turn out to watch the fun; no wonder they are chased away and take to their heels. What do we know about justice? From your ancestors' times it has been agreed that what the men

say is right. Don't you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you've learnt a few letters of the alphabet.'

'So, Paatti, does that mean that whatever men say is bound to be right? And that whatever women say will always be wrong?' I spoke out because I was really chafing inside my mind.

'Whether it is right or wrong, it is better for women not to open their mouths. You just try speaking out about what you believe is right. You'll only get kicked and beaten and trampled on for your pains. And it isn't just here that it happens, you know. It's the same throughout the world. Women are not given that kind of respect.' Paatti scraped up the betel leaves and nut that she had crushed in her mortar, popped the mixture into her mouth, gave it a couple of good chomps, and stowed it away inside her cheek.

'Look how she talks—as if she's been around the whole world,' I thought to myself. But I didn't actually say this to Paatti. I took some of her betel mixture and began chewing too. 'It's you folk who are always putting us down,' I told her. 'From the time we are babies you treat boys in one way and girls in quite another. It's you folk who put butter in one eye and quicklime in the other.'

Paatti spat out betel juice in a stream and turned on me. 'Oi, daughter of a sinner, look at the questions you ask! Whoever starved you or deprived you of kanji for you to complain like this?'

'I'm not talking about kanji. Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can't stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti, aren't we also human beings?'

Paatti asked me in her turn, 'Do you think it's been like this just yesterday or today? Hasn't all this been written about in books as well, haven't you read about it?'

'What's in the books? You talk as if you've read it all yourself.'

'You know perfectly well that nobody helped me to read. In those days, girls didn't go to school much. The white nuns who came here made a big effort to try and teach your mother. They gave the children every chance to study: free notebooks, kanji at midday. Silly girl, refused to go to school beyond the fifth class.'

'Yes, but you said, there was something in the books,' I reminded her.

'Oh yes, it's about the wife of someone called Tiruvalluvar, you know? Seems she would sit next to her husband, pick up the grains of cooked rice that scattered from his leaf with a needle, and rinse them out. Must have been a very finicky lady. Look, why couldn't she have picked them up with her fingers? Anyway, the point is that even in those days, the women ate after the men.'

'So what would be so wrong if we changed that and the women ate first?'

'Wrong? You'll end up like that Anantamma of West Street, who was thrashed soundly and left lying there, that's all. And haven't you heard that song that children here go about singing?

Crab, O crab, my pretty little crab
Who wandered through all the fields I planted,
I pulled off your claws and put you in the pot
I gave the pot a boil and set it down.
I waited and waited for him to come home
And began to eat as he came through the door.
He came to hit me, the hungry brute
He pounced at me to kill me
He struck me, he struck my child
He almost crushed the baby in my womb
He beat me until my legs buckled
He thrashed me until my bangles smashed.

The song says that the husband beat her up so much even though she was carrying a child—and all this torture just because she caught some crabs from the wet fields and made a curry and ate it before he came home for his meal. And here you are, just prattling on without thinking!' And Paatti got up and walked off.

What Paatti said was true, too. If women are openly seen to be acting in unexpected ways, it is true that everyone will abuse them.

Even when we played 'mothers and fathers', we always had to serve the mud 'rice' to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us, saying, 'What sort of food is this, di, without salt or anything!' In those days, we used to accept those pretence blows, and think it was all good fun. Nowadays, for many of the girls, those have become real blows, and their entire lives are hell.

It's like this from the moment we are born. One day, a number of us were sitting down to a dice-game. In the midst of this, Muukkamma from East Street turned up. 'Ei, sister-in-law Lourdu, haven't you got any common sense at all? There's your son screeching like a crow, having pissed all over the cradle-cloth. And here you are, chucking a dice around. If it were a girl at least, you could leave her to cry. But how can you come away, leaving your son bawling by himself?'

As soon as Muukkamma said this, Lourdu left the game and fled. I asked immediately, 'So you can't leave a boy baby to cry, but you can leave a girl to scream on her own, can you?'

'Why, yes, after all tomorrow he's the one who'll fill a mouth that's desperate for food and water. You rear a girl child and give her away into someone else's hands. Is she the one who is going to look after you in the end?'

When Vellakkannu Perimma said this, Sappaani countered, 'In these days, neither the girls nor the boys are going to look after you. If we work hard, we earn our own kanji. Otherwise, there's nothing. We just have to hope that God will take us away while our arms and legs are still strong, that's all.' And we all got up and went home.

When we played 'buses', there were always boys at the start and finish of the rope as driver and conductor, who allowed the girls to enter in the middle, and shouted at them. And when we played husbands and wives they were the ones in authority; they took the roles of policemen and shop owners.

If it was like this at home, it was even worse at church. When we were in the seventh and eighth class, me and my friends Jayapillai, Nirumala, Chandura, Seeniamma, and others wanted desperately to peep into the sacristy at least once, someday, somehow, and run away without getting caught. But we never ever made it, even a single time. Even the tiniest boys, born just the other day, would manage to get in there as quick as anything. They'd go in one way and come out the other. But they never allowed the girls to join in.

If they put on a play or something on a festival day, they never allowed women to take part. The men themselves would dress up and act as women rather than allow us to join in.

Once they planned to put on a play like this. You can't imagine the crowd that turned up for the performance. But before it could even begin, seven or eight fellows were filling up the stage, chattering away, and discussing the cast. All the women who had come there to see the performance got really fed up.

South Street Sesamma complained, 'If all these fellows can do is to get together and jabber away, as if they don't have a care in the world, when is the play to get going? It's only after the play is over that they'll allow the "record-dancers" from Marudai to do their stuff.'

Mochcha Mary said in reply, 'It seems there's a scene in the play in which the baby Sesu appears. They are still going round looking for a light-coloured child to take the role, that's why it's taking so long.'

'My brother-in-law's daughter is as pink as a rose. They could take her,' proposed Kanni Maria. But before she could finish, West Street Bhakkiyam cut in bluntly, 'Do you have any sense in your head? You're actually suggesting that they should go and find a little girl to play the part of Sesu?'

'Ei, listen to this woman! Are they going to have a Jesus who will be stark naked or what?' Amalorpavam said. 'Who's going to know it's a girl if she wears a shirt that hides everything, and they carry her wrapped in a cloth? It's a good idea, you wretch!'

'Yēs, di, that's true enough; quick, run and tell them that. At least let them make a start on the play,' Bhakkiyam encouraged her. At this point,

Antoniamma butted in and said to Bhakkiyam, 'But they are also looking for a fair-skinned boy to play Our Lady. Will you volunteer for that, Perimma?'

Bhakkiyam was angry and snapped back, 'What cheek! How dare you ask me like that! You go and ask your own mother, you slut! What a way to talk!'

Paathimapillai said, 'But why shouldn't they give the role of Our Lady to a woman who is just as fair as the man they want? Our teacher's daughter is fair. If she is made up and given a baby to hold in her arms, she'll look just like Our Lady of Lourdes.'

'We've tried telling them that. They've absolutely refused. And for all that, it's only a scene lasting five minutes. But they won't let a woman do even that much.'

While the women were saying all this amongst themselves, the men dressed up North Street Thomas as the Virgin Mary, and gave him a baby to hold. And so the play began at last. Because they couldn't find anyone else, they agreed to have a girl as the baby Jesus. And of course, seeing the bright lights on the stage and all the people gathered there, baby Jesus raised a deafening racket. After that, one way or another, the play proceeded.

In the middle of the performance, the current failed. At once Bhakkiyam said loudly, scratching away at her head and yawning, 'They kept on competing, talking into the mike one after the other, that's why the current became empty in that Chinnayya's house. Tell them to go and draw the current from someone else's house now.'

Everyone burst out laughing at this.

'What's the matter, you idiots? What are you giggling for? Don't you want it to finish so that we can all go home and go to sleep, you sluts?'

'Ei, Paatti, if the current is off in one house, it's probably off everywhere,' Kozhandaiyamma informed her, laughing. 'Is it like kerosene oil or what, to run out?'

'Whatever it is, what do I know about it?' complained Bhakkiyam, screwing up her face.

This Bhakkiyam had borne seventeen children. Eleven of them had died. There were only six left. And she was the one who made us all laugh, one *puusai* time at church.

Usually, on Sundays, the women used to take their offerings to the *saamiyaar* during the puusai. They put grains and pulses depending on the season, into a box—paddy, maize, millet, pulses, sesame seeds, or beans, or whatever was growing in the fields—carried it to the priest, gave it to him and received his blessing. It was only the women who carried these offerings. I've never known a man to carry such a box and walk down the aisle during the puusai.

On that day too, the women went in a row, carrying their boxes and walking hesitantly, full of fear and devotion. This Bhakkiyam was among them. All the other women had boxes in their hands. Not Bhakkiyam. One of the women at the rear noticed this and commented loudly, 'Look at this old woman Bhakkiyam. She doesn't have an offering or anything, yet she's got up and joined the others, look, the shameless donkey.'

Hearing this, Bhakkiyam turned around, glared at the woman, and walked on in the procession. From somewhere among the row of women, a hen cackled as it was carried along.

East Street Mariaposuppam remarked, 'Some woman has gone and put a hen into her box and brought it along. This is all showing off, you know. Letting a hen cackle in the church!'

'But who can it be? We can only hear the noise but can't make out who's carrying the creature!'

'Watch out as they hand over their offering. We'll see who's got a hen in her box.' There was a lot of joking and laughing like this as the offering was handed over, that day.

Each woman handed over her box, bowed low in respect to the priest and then went her way. There wasn't a hen in any of the boxes. Finally Bhakkiyam came up to the altar railing, took out the hen that she had kept hidden in her sari, and handed it to the saamiyaar. The hen flapped its wings and raised a cry that must have reached seven villages away. The entire congregation began to laugh.

The priest didn't know what to do. He accepted the hen, but as it

flung itself about, flapping its wings wildly, he loosened his hold, terrified that it would shit all over his robes and everything. The hen dropped down, squawked even more loudly, and began to run about in the church. At this, ten or so of the boys sitting in the front rows got up. They chased after it and caught it, took it to the saamiyaar's bungalow, left it tied up there and returned. Bhakkiyam alone remained unperturbed, even though everyone else was in stitches. It looked as if she wanted to smile too. But she controlled herself, didn't forget to bow down to the priest, walked back down the aisle with extreme seriousness, and knelt down at her own place. All the men laughed too, but after a while they took it upon themselves to scold the women saying, 'Why are you laughing in church? Disrespectful donkeys! Don't you have any sense of what's right?'

Now, you know this Bhakkiyam, she'd turn up at church once in a blue moon. When she did turn up, she'd keep on touching and kissing the priest's hands and feet and his robe after he gave her communion. The priest was always delighted. There are lots of people exactly like her.

During festival times, people in the village used to sing over the mike. Even then it was the men who sang and beat the rhythm. There were so many amongst us women who could sing really beautifully. But never to this day has a single one of us been allowed to sing in public. We certainly have not been invited. When I was a little girl, during festival times, women used to gather together at night to sing and to dance the *kummi*. Now, even that has stopped.

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husbands' torment.

How will their bodies stand it if they keep on bearing children? They

don't get proper food or drink. It's the men who fill themselves up at home and in the shops. Women rarely go into hospitals, but deliver their children at home in a makeshift way. Many women die at childbirth or soon after. Almost immediately the men marry a second time. As for birth control, the men won't do it. They say they'll lose their strength if they do. And women say that if they are sterilized in a haphazard way by people without proper training, they will not be able to work in the fields as before. If they can't work, how will they eat? As it is, the families keep going only because of the women. So the questions they ask sound reasonable to me.

CHAPTER four

As soon as it was the month of Thai, Vellaiyamma Paatti said to Mariamma, 'This year the ponds have all filled up. The crops have come up well in the fields. If you and your younger sister find some work reaping the grain, you might be able to gather two, three sacks of paddy. If we are to get you married early in the month of *Vaiyaasi*, then we'll need some rice, no? Your father is not likely to lift a finger. Does he care at all that there are two girls in the house who have come of age?'

Sammuga Kizhavi, who was sitting nearby, parting her hair, overheard Paatti. 'Which fellow is queuing up, demanding your granddaughter's hand in marriage? And here you are, sending her off to cut the grain, all ready for the wedding!'

This Sammuga Kizhavi's real name was Shanmugam. We younger children used to call her 'Maikkuuzh Kizhavi', *ragi-kuuzh* Old Woman. She was always furious when she heard us. Normally, when people made a ragi-kuuzh, they boiled up a handful of broken rice with it. They said you could only deal with your hunger that way. But this old woman never put in any rice, but drank her kuuzh just like that. We asked her once why.

'If you cook it with rice, the rice grains get in the way and you never feel as if you swallowed your kuuzh. Just try the ragi-kuuzh on its own. It will slip down your throat as easy as anything, with each gulp. And if you take some bites of the vegetable pickles from the Nadar's shop, in between mouthfuls, it will surely be as good as nectar from heaven.'

And she scolded us on top of that, saying, 'What do you know about it, silly little children like you!'

If you went and talked to her, it would surely end in abuse; and even if you kept quiet she would come of her own accord with some complaint or other and cause trouble. She'd butt into any conversation and start a quarrel. Everyone complained that she could never mind her own business.

Vellaiyamma Paatti was enraged when she heard Sammuga Kizhavi's words, and so was I. Paatti said at once, 'Ei, so do the bridegrooms queue up smartly, one after the other, for your granddaughters, then? Black-tongued *mundé*! Why don't you stick to your own business? She'll stick her head into any conversation that's going, with her evil words! Shut your trap and get away from here, you stinking mundé!' Then she turned to Mariamma and went on, still abusing the old woman, 'Let her be, wretched mundé. You take no notice of her. If you look into a dead dog's eye, you'll only see a basketful of worms. The stinking evil woman had to open her mouth and give us her opinion.'

I too scolded her under my breath, 'This old woman is really wicked. Just look at her face!' Had she heard me, I would have been done for.

For her part, Maikkuuzh Kizhavi shook out the four or so strands of hair which spread out from her head, tied them into a knot, spat out to one side, and went off leaning against her stick and shouting abuses in her turn. 'Now what have I said about your precious granddaughter that you should fall on me like a pack of rabid dogs? Go away, you whores. If you don't know your reputation, go and ask in the town. Even a babe who was born yesterday knows all about your granddaughter. The whore was caught red-handed and was accused and shamed in front of the whole village. Now she talks big. Thuu! And you too, showing off. If you had such a thing as pride or honour, you'd go and drown yourselves in a well or a pond.'

Paralokam, who turned up just then, commented, 'Why do you have to bandy words with her? You know how she's a blabber-mouth.'

'Why would I talk to that mundé, di? She's always the one to start it. Like the fart that comes before shit, or the water breaking before the

baby.' And Paatti too went off with her sickle, to cut some thorny twigs for her cooking.

I got more and more angry as I thought of this Sammuga Kizhavi. In our village, they used to call her 'crazy mundé'. When we returned home from church after evening prayer, if ever this old woman joined us, we'd leave her behind and set off smartly at a run. Because, if she came with us, she'd join the hands of two of the children in our gang, drop a fart in the middle and push off. Dreadful woman. She wasn't scared of anything.

One day we were all on our way to school. Just then, the women of our street who were going off to work in the landlord's fields came past. We had gone into a shop to buy a slate-pencil, and were negotiating for some sweets with the money that was left over, when Sammuga Kizhavi came in.

'Move aside, move aside, you children,' she said. 'As if the entire paraiya community is going to make progress just because these are going to school!' Then she said to the shopkeeper, 'Mudalaali, give me pickle for ten paisa.'

When we saw her, we wanted to fall about with laughter. She had made a cloth pad on top of her head with the end of her sari and placed a pot there; she carried a spade across one shoulder, and had hung a thermos flask from the other. Why would a woman going to weed the sesame fields want to carry a thermos flask? We giggled and whispered amongst ourselves that she must be carrying coffee in the flask. When we were at the convent school, we had seen the sisters drinking coffee out of such flasks. So one of us, a girl named Michaela Pillai, asked her boldly, 'Ei, Paatti, is that coffee you are carrying with you?' Then she giggled.

'Who was that? Beat her with a chappal. She's too clever for her own good. See how she's trying to needle me? If you are up to such tricks at such an early age, I wonder what you're waiting to do when you grow up. Did you hear her making fun of me, mudalaali, saying I'm carrying coffee?' She appealed to Arumuga Chettiar, the owner of the shop.

Chettiar asked in his turn, 'So what's wrong with what the child

asked? Here you are, going around with a flask slung from your shoulder. That's why she asked you. So who are you taking the coffee for, then? Did the Nayakkar ask you to fetch it?'

'Oho, are you talking about this? I've poured my ragi-kuuzh into it. It seems the part inside that's shiny like glass, is broken. Our Nayakkar amma threw it away with the rubbish, saying something is wrong with it. But I brought it home, tipped out all the glass bits, and poured my plain ragi-kuuzh into it. Just in case there isn't enough, I'm taking some in this pot as well. This pickle I bought just now, is to go with it.' And off she went.

The Chettiar laughed. So did we, as we set off for school. That evening, when I went home, I told so many people about the kuuzh in the flask, and laughed so much, my stomach hurt. From that day, the name Maikkuuzh Kizhavi was forgotten and a new name came into being: Flask Kuuzh. It was enough for someone to call out, 'Ei, Flask!' She'd take her stick and fling it at us with all her strength, she'd be that furious.

Anyway, just as Paatti had told her to do, Mariamma called her younger sister, and the two of them set off to find work cutting grain at harvest time. Even when she was working out in the fields, or on the threshing floor, people would always make insinuating remarks about her having been called up before the village council. Mariamma began to feel totally fed up with life. 'For no fault of mine, I get abused wherever I go. Did I ever look that fellow in the face even? Yet the people of this village call me every kind of name.'

The tears came into my eyes when I heard this. I felt so frustrated that women didn't show any pity or compassion towards other women. Paatti too was deeply pained. Her entire face looked faded and withered. She sighed and said to Mariamma, 'Even if someone were to come here and ask for your hand, these awful people will fill their ears with all sorts of rubbish. I don't know how on earth I'm going to see you safely ashore. Then there's your sister who's also come of age. The next one too has shot up and looks as if she's ready to reach puberty at any moment.

There shouldn't be two, three women, all unmarried, in a house. The entire village will be ready to chew us up.'

Mariamma's father, Samudrakani, turned up just then, so Paatti spoke to him about all these things that were gnawing away in her mind. 'Mariamma is growing older all the time, no? It's best to hand her away to a man in good time. People are saying terrible things about this child and insulting her when she was only minding her own business.'

But Samudrakani only became furious at Paatti's words. 'If she had only behaved herself, who would have said anything? Is there smoke without fire? Who's going to marry her now that she's lost her reputation? We should marry her off to that boy Manikkam, without any more fuss. There's no other way.'

Mariamma began to sob and sob as Samudrakani shouted all this. But Paatti said in reply, 'Are you saying you'll hand the child over to that fellow of all people—an out-and-out drunkard? It will be like raising a parrot and then handing it over to a cat. He never goes out to work. Whenever you see him, he's gambling. They say he even pawned the household vessels in order to gamble—and then only lost it all. And then he's been to jail seven or eight times for brewing *arrack* on the sly.'

Samudrakani said nothing more, but stalked off, lighting a *bidi*.

But after he went away, Paatti thought for a while, and it struck her that there was some sense in what he said, 'If we can't fix her up with anyone, we can't just keep her at home forever as a virgin. If we give her to this Manikkam, at least there will be a marriage. After that, the other children can be brought ashore, safely.'

When she told Mariamma about her idea, Mariamma refused most stubbornly. 'That fellow hasn't married all this while only because no one was willing to give him a bride. I'd rather hang myself with a couple of lengths of rope than marry him.' And she too left with her water pot.

Paatti realized that what Mariamma said was fair enough, but she didn't know what she should do.

As soon as it was Vaiyaasi, though, Samudrakani himself set about briskly, badgered and chivvied Mariamma, and finally got her married to Manikkam.

From the time she was married, Mariamma suffered blows and kicks and beatings every day, and was reduced to no more than a half-life, or even less.

When I thought of Mariamma's life history, I was filled with such pain and anger. Because of some upper-caste man's foolishness, she was made the scapegoat, and her whole life was destroyed. If a woman is slandered, that's always her fate. People won't consider whether the accusation is true or not, nor will they allow the woman to speak out. They'll marry her off to any disreputable fellow and wash their hands off her, not caring in the least whether she lives or dies. I was disgusted by it. I wanted to get hold of all those who had brought her to this state, bite them, chew them up, and spit them out.

In the West Street, there was another woman in a similar position, called Thaayi. When I heard of her story, I thought to myself, one should never be born a woman.

Thaayi was the lightest-skinned woman in our entire area. When women like that smoothed their hair down, dressed well, and made themselves up and all that, they looked just like Nayakkar women. But never did a day go by without her being beaten up. Her people made a lot of fuss and forced her into marrying a man she did not like. Her husband used to drag her along the street and flog her like an animal, with a stick or with his belt.

One evening I was returning home from school. Even as I entered our street, I could hear Thaayi weeping. As I came closer and saw what was going on, my eyes filled with tears. Thaayi's husband was beating her up again and again with the belt from his waist. She didn't even have a chattai on. Everywhere the strap fell on her light skin, there were bright red weals. Even now, when I remember the way he flung her down, and was treading on her and beating her at the same time, a great shudder passes through me.

Just as I was hoping desperately that someone would come and carry her away from there, Karuthamuthu called out in protest, 'Are you a human being or what, da? Isn't there a limit to how much you hit a woman? You are killing her like this, without any pity.'

When he heard this, Thaayi's husband became even more furious. He retorted, 'Who are you to speak for this mundé? She's my wife, I can beat her or kill her if I wish. You go and mind your own business.' Then he abused Thaayi some more. 'You common whore, you, any passing loafer will come in support of you, you mother fucker's daughter. You'll go with ten men!' He began abusing her and beating her even more violently.

Everyone who came there was disgusted, and went away lamenting, 'If this fellow were an ordinary man, you could pull him off. But how can you talk to a brute like that? If you try to stop him, he only calls her a whore and hits her even harder.'

I felt strange; my chest was heavy and choked. When I came home, I said to my mother, 'Well, Amma, just because he's tied a tali round her neck, does it mean he can beat his wife as he likes? It's just pitiful to see Thaayi, Amma.'

My mother sighed and said, 'It's as if you become a slave from the very day you are married. That's why all the men scold their wives and keep them well under control. Even so, I've never seen anyone else beat his wife like this.'

Then she went on, 'One day I went to see Thaayi at their house. I saw a big hunk of hair—this thick—tied to the doorpost of the threshold, and hanging down. She had spread the paddy out to dry in the front courtyard, and was calling aloud to the pigs, to come and drink up the water in which the grain had been soaked. "Ba...ba...utti...utti," she was calling out. I called her and asked why there was that bunch of hair hanging from the doorpost. Before she could answer me, her husband came out of the house and said, "The thing is, *Madani*, I wanted four or five people like you to ask exactly that and to spit in her face. It's this whore's hair that I've cut off myself and hung there. Look at her neck—you won't find a single hair left. I cut her hair off to put down her pride." And he laughed. He doesn't have a single drop of kindness in his heart.'

When I heard this, I felt a great fury. I asked her, 'Why, Amma, why must she stay with that fellow and suffer so much? Why can't she leave him and go away by herself? At least she won't be beaten like this.'

'It's not so easy to get away, once you are married. Once you've put your head in the mortar, can you escape from the pestle? No, she must continue to suffer until her head rests on the earth at last.' When my mother said this, a variety of emotions grew in my heart: anger, excitement, fury, pride, resentment, hatred.

CHAPTER five

'Ei, di, Sevathi, have you heard the news? It seems your macchaan's daughter, Manacchi has been possessed by a pey, and is dancing in a frenzy.' Paatti arrived with this news.

Damaatta Maadu, who was cleaning the cooking pots in her house, came out at once, rinsing her hands and asking, 'Who's possessed, Perimma? How did she become possessed, then?'

'Damaatta Maadu' was Gnanammaal's nickname. Nobody called her by her real name anymore; people always said, 'Damaatta Maadu'. In our village, young bullocks were garlanded and decorated, and then taken round from door to door by people who asked for money. The poor animal went wherever they were dragged, dazed, and completely unaware of what was going on. And this Gnanammaal was just like that. That's why she was called 'Damaatta Maadu'.

The way Paatti shouted, all the people there dropped whatever they were doing and came running up to her. As soon as seven or eight people had gathered around her, Paatti sat down at leisure and began to speak in detail about Manacchi. I was drinking my kanji at the time, so I lifted up my bowl, gulped it down, washed my hands haphazardly, and ran up to Paatti to hear her story.

'Last Wednesday, that child Manacchi went into the Muliamma woods, to pluck a couple of handfuls of grass for her cow. Poor wretch, couldn't she at least have taken someone with her, and that too when it was growing dark...'

At this point, Chinnamma interrupted Paatti. 'That's right. It was

just last month that Muukayya Chettiar's wife fell into the well there and died....' But several women shouted together, 'Why is this woman butting in, why can't she let Vellaiyamma Kizhavi finish the story....' So Chinnamma shut up.

Vellaiyamma Paatti went on, 'She pulled up the grass she wanted, tied it up into a bundle and set off home, when she heard a tremendous splash as if someone had just fallen into the well. Poor fool, she was startled out of her wits, and turned round. The Chettiar's wife was standing in the dead centre of the well, laughing and making a rattling noise like the scattering of a handful of coins. It seems Manacchi went straight home without even carrying her bundle with her and fell down on her bed in a trance. She hasn't eaten or drunk anything since then, and has been running a fever. Nobody knows exactly what has happened to her. She's dancing in a frenzy now, and reminding us that it is a Friday.' Paatti pulled out her snuff bag and took a pinch of snuff.

'Just hearing about it makes my hair stand on end,' said Damaatta Maadu.

'Where is she dancing, Paatti?' I asked.

'They've brought her near St Anthony's shrine. Don't you girls go off to watch her! The pey always grabs hold of young girls as soon as it claps eyes on them.'

Muukamma of West Street asked, 'Why did this troublesome pey suddenly start dancing, after having been quiet all this time?'

'You see they've been giving her all sorts of rubbish to bring down the fever, not realizing that it was the pey's fault all along. I saw her myself. She was lying down with poultices all over her head and forehead. It was that Ucchaavi Kizhavi who said at last, "Ei, you donkeys, is it for nothing that they say, look to the disease, but look to the pey as well? Go and fetch the *kodangi*-man and ask him what's happening to the girl." Sure enough, when they fetched the kodangi, the soothsayer, everything became clear. Do these girls listen when we tell them they shouldn't go off on their own anywhere?' And Paatti got up and walked off.

'See now, we can't go to those fields even to do our work. As if this

lady couldn't choose another place! She had to go and die at the very well where people usually stop and have a drink.'

'My daughter was telling me that child Manacchi had her period that day, besides. She must really have been in a trance. Everyone knows that all peys are attracted by the smell of menstrual blood.'

They all went their different ways, each one giving her own opinion about what had happened.

I wanted to go and see Manacchi. But at the same time, I was scared. I thought it would be better to go with a couple of friends, and so I invited Paralokam and Pechiathaal to go along with me.

There was a huge crowd in front of St Anthony's shrine. Manacchi was sitting right in the middle. Her hair was unkempt, and spread out. She was wide-eyed, staring all around. It was terrifying just to see her like that. She didn't say a word.

We stood there for a long time, thinking she would start swaying and dancing. But she didn't move. People said she had just finished dancing, in any case. So I came away, telling myself I would go and watch the next time she did it.

I couldn't sleep a wink that whole night. When I was in the seventh class, one evening, just as we were about to set off to church, we heard that a woman of the *vanaan* caste was possessed and was dancing. And so, four or five of us skipped church and went to watch instead. That memory kept haunting me as I lay there that night. I thought and thought about it, and was infinitely afraid. I lay there stiff and motionless, afraid to even stretch out or turn over.

The vanaan community lived on a street just next to ours. It must have been about six in the evening. Irulappan's wife became possessed by Esakki; she was the one who danced. Irulappan's family had summoned the soothsayer to beat his kodangi drum. When we arrived there, a huge crowd had gathered already. Irulappan's wife, Virayi was sitting in the middle of the crowd, her hair loose, her eyes staring about. Whenever her gaze fell on me, I immediately hid behind the person who stood in front of me. I was scared the pey would see me and catch hold of me too.

The kodangi had smeared sacred ash all over his forehead, and had placed a bright red *kunkumam* mark in the middle. His mouth was full of betel leaves which he was chewing, and he held his kettledrum in his hand. In front of him was a platter with betel leaves and nuts, kunkumam, bananas, incense sticks, and everything. Next to him was an earthenware pot full of live coals, over which frankincense was being sprinkled. Incense smoke rose up in a cloud. When I saw Virayi through that smoke, her hair all spread out, my stomach churned. Even the smell of the incense was weird. We stood together in that dense crowd, terrified, holding on to our guts.

The soothsayer began to beat his kodangi drum. There was a stomach-churning rhythmic sound, 'Dayin dayinda dayin dayinda dayin dayinda'. As soon as Virayi heard it, her head began to sway in time to the rhythm. I felt as if hairy caterpillars from the drumstick tree were crawling inside my chest. I wanted to run away from there. At the same time, I wanted to watch Virayi dance for a little while before I went away.

The soothsayer beat his kodangi drum faster and faster. Virayi tossed her head about and whirled round and round. Her face was beaded with sweat. As Virayi swirled and whirled, my own head began to sway, without my being aware of it. When I looked around me, I realized that it wasn't just my head that was swaying about, but the heads of older women, too. I said to Innasiamma who had come there with me, 'I'm really frightened now. Let's go now, please. It's time to go to church, anyhow.'

But she, for her part, said, 'We've watched all this while, after all. Very soon now, she'll carry a stone on her head and run. Let's just watch that too.' And she squeezed her way through the crowd and made her way to the front.

Before she carried the stone, though, a lock of her hair had to be pulled off from the top of Virayi's head. This would be nailed, later on, to the banyan tree where Esakki lived. It was to watch them do this that Innasi had jostled her way through to the front of the crowd.

Virayi had danced and danced to the point of exhaustion. The kodangi asked her, 'When did you catch hold of this virgin girl?'

Still swaying, Virayi answered, 'At mid afternoon, she was steaming

clothes and washing them by the canal. I caught hold of her at that time.' People standing nearby told me that it was Esakki speaking through Virayi.

'You've held on to this virgin girl for a long time. We'll make a new cradle and a winnowing tray and offer them to you. Will you let her go?' The kodangi beat his drum furiously now.

Virayi answered, 'If you have a chattai made for me, and give it with the cradle and the winnowing tray, I'll go away.' And then she danced again, swaying to the same fast rhythm as the drum. While she was still dancing, the soothsayer dragged her by the hair, and then, suddenly, twisted his hand around a thick lock from the top of her head and wrenched it off. It seems people who are possessed never feel any pain however much they are pulled or beaten. It is only after they have finished dancing and come back to their own senses that they know what has happened. Anyway, at that moment Virayi stopped dancing. Then they woke her up, tidied up her sari, picked up a big stone which had been kept ready, and placed it on her head. As soon as they did this, she began running as fast as she could, along the lake's shore. The soothsayer followed her. Two or three other men went along too. No women accompanied them. It seems the pey would have entered them, had they gone.

We stood watching, having abandoned going to church. It seems Virayi would throw the stone by the canal where there stood a big banyan tree. The soothsayer would nail the lock of hair that he had plucked out to the tree trunk and offer the tree turmeric, kunkumam, and flowers. Then he would bring Virayi home. When she returned, she would no longer be possessed. Esakki would go back into the tree and stay there. The next day, four or five men would go there with a newly made wooden cradle, a new winnowing tray, and a new sari-blouse, and hang all these on the tree. If anyone attempted to steal these things, Esakki would surely catch hold of them.

We walked home, listening to the women's words. My mother asked me, 'Why are you so late, wherever have you been? All the other children came home from church ages ago.'

I replied casually, escaping with a lie, 'The saamiyaar asked a few of

us children to stay back and sweep out the church. That's why I'm so late.'

The next day, people were talking in the street about how Virayi threw away that stone. Paatti said, 'Hereafter, people coming home after the late show at the cinema and walking along that lake must be really careful. They have to come and go past that very tree.'

I asked Paatti then, 'Why does the pey only possess women, Paatti? It never seems to go for the men, even when they are on their own.'

'How will it catch men? They know how to be brave in their hearts. The pey only catches people who are scared. It's women who are always fearful cowards.'

Kozhandai Amma added, 'It's not just that, you know. It's women who are polluted every month. It's when they are menstruating, they say, the pey will get at them. Men don't have this nuisance, you see.'

'Whatever it is, look, it seems that we are slighted even by peys,' Rasamma laughed and went on her way.

Paatti cautioned me. 'Don't go anywhere near that tree when you are playing. Even if you do, never, never touch the cradle and other things, and don't ever bring them away. If Esakki gets her hands on you, she won't let go easily. Specially if she catches you when you are a virgin, she'll never leave you in your entire lifetime.' Then she went on, 'Have a look at my head, girl, the lice are biting me to death.' She loosened her hair, shook it out, and came and sat in front of me.

I parted her hair and picked out the lice. At the same time, I asked her, 'Why do they always offer cradles and winnowing trays, Paatti? Why can't we offer anything else?

'For Esakki they must always offer cradles, dolls, and such things. She demands them, nothing else. But don't you know her story?'

When I said I didn't, Paatti began to tell me. In my eagerness to hear it, I left off what I was doing and went and sat in front of her. She scolded me sharply. 'You carry on parting my hair while you listen. I'll tell you.'

'In those days, long ago in a certain town, a mother and father had eight children. The first seven were all boys. The eighth child was a girl. The parents were overjoyed to have a daughter at last, after seven boys

in a row. And the seven boys cherished the girl as if she were a flower, as if she were gold. Esakki was the name of that very child. The brothers, each one, wanted to raise her carefully until she grew into a woman, and then arrange a good match for her; they wouldn't allow even an ant or a flea to bite her.'

'So in those days, they didn't think of girls so badly then?' I asked, leaving off picking out lice, and going and sitting in front of her again.

'You keep at the lice, and I'll tell you the story,' Paatti said, before she would carry on. Half-heartedly I went and sat behind her.

'What were you asking? Did you say that girls are not rated highly? It's like that only in these days. At that time it was fine to have either a boy or a girl. If a baby was born, whatever it was, people were happy. It was only bad to be barren and have no children at all.' She was quiet for a while before continuing with the story of Esakki.

'The brothers lavished their affection on her, and so the silly fool grew up to be very self-willed. Of all people, she went and fell in love with a fellow of the vanaan caste. The brothers somehow came to know about it. They were so outraged, they wanted to hack her to pieces and bury her then and there. Anyhow, they took her aside and tried to talk sense into her. They explained that all they wanted was to get her married to a well-off man from a good family.'

'So I suppose she agreed?' I asked, stopping my lice-picking.

'If the wicked girl had agreed to her brothers' wishes, there wouldn't have been a problem, would there? No, no. Instead she declared once and for all, "If I marry at all, I'll only marry him." The brothers were furious and went away, saying, "So long as we are alive, that will never happen."'

'After they had gone, Esakki thought and thought about it. At last she left the house and ran away before her brothers could return. And where do you think she went? She went straight to that vanaan fellow's house, told him everything, and wept.'

'And what do you think he did, immediately? He ran away with Esakki to another town. And there, in secret and on their own, they worked, set up house, and lived happily together.'

She scolded me, 'Don't climb all over me as if I were a horse, just pick out the lice, *thaaye*. My whole body hurts.'

'I can't reach, Paatti, I have to keep stretching out and stretching out.' I gave up on the lice, and went and sat in front of her.

Paatti shook out her hair, tied it into a knot and carried on with the story. 'Do you think the brothers would give up that easily? Somehow or other they found out where Esakki was. By this time she was pregnant. When she was very nearly full-term, the brothers arrived at her house, bringing with them a couple of bananas and such like.'

My heart was beating fast. I was full of suspense, wondering what they might do to Esakki. 'Did they beat her up, Paatti?' I asked, in my haste to know what happened next.

But Paatti took her time. 'You're a fine one, di, patient enough to cook a meal, too impatient to let it cool. I'm telling you, aren't I?' She yawned and then wiped her eyes with her sari, saying, 'What with having my hair groomed, my eyes will hardly stay open.'

I said to her, 'What did they do to Esakki, Paatti? Tell me first and then go to sleep.'

'When she suddenly found her brothers standing in front of her as if they had turned up from nowhere, Esakki thought her heart would stop. She thought the baby in her womb would come out then and there. Her husband was also cowering with fright. The couple stood there, terrified, too dumbstruck even to welcome the brothers. So the brothers began to speak to her.'

'"Esakki, why are you silent, Amma? Whatever has happened, we can't be hard-hearted about you. When you left home we were broken-hearted. We asked everywhere, to find out your whereabouts. There hasn't been a moment each day, when we haven't worried about the difficulties you must be facing—you whom we brought up so tenderly. At last, we found out just now where you are. Can you imagine how delighted we are that we'll soon have a niece or a nephew? Whatever happened is over and done with. It is your happiness that is important to us now."'

'They carried on like this for a while, and insisting that she must

return to her parents' house for the birth of her first baby, they tricked her into coming away with them.'

'That poor fool Esakki believed them, and set off so happily. Only her husband wouldn't trust them even one little bit, and in his heart he never consented to her going away. He was full of fear as he sent her with them. And then, just as they set off, a lizard chirped. As soon as he heard it, his heart filled with dread and he kept thinking something terrible was going to happen.' As Paatti came to this part of the story, her voice sounded hoarse. I thought I was going to cry. Paatti cleared her throat and went on.

'Those villains had no intention of taking Esakki home. Instead, they made straight for the mountain forests. Esakki realized then that she had trusted her brothers only to be betrayed. Weeping frantically, she tried to escape them and run away. But what could she do against seven men? They gagged her, tied her hand and foot, thrust her into a covered cart so that nobody could see her, and drove her away into the jungle.'

'Was there nobody at all in the jungle, Paatti?'

'Very occasionally you might find someone there, grazing cows or goats. But they took her away, you see, deep into the forest. There are hardly any signs of human beings there. Only wild animals like elephants and lions and tigers. There they dragged her out of the cart and without even caring that she was a full-term pregnant woman, with one sweep of a sword they separated her head from her body. They sliced open her stomach, took out the baby, twisted its neck, and killed it. Then they went home. Somehow the shepherds at the base of the mountain came to know of it and went and told the vanaan. From the time he heard the news he went crazy, and wandered about in the mountain jungle, hitting himself across his mouth and stomach and lamenting, "Esakki, Esakki!" Nobody knows what happened to him in the end. A tiger or something must have killed him.'

After that Paatti didn't say anything more. And I too was quiet.

Sometime later, she added, 'Since that time, Esakki has been wandering about as a pey. She didn't die naturally, but was butchered to death, wasn't

she? And what's more, she died a full-term pregnant woman. That's why she wanders about as a spirit. Whoever she possesses, she'll always ask for a cradle or a winnowing tray, things like that.' Paatti finished her story and went off home. I lay down and kept thinking of Esakki's story for a long time and fell asleep at last.

They spoke a lot about peys in our streets. They said that if people didn't die naturally, when they had committed suicide or died by accident, for example, by falling under a cart, or if they had been murdered, their souls would wander about recklessly as peys. Besides these, there was supposed to be a *muni* in the west side of the village. It lived in the big banyan tree there. It had buried seven cauldrons full of coins amongst the branching roots of the tree, and kept guard over the treasure. Then, towards the north, there were wandering troupes of Ayyankaachi. These went about in groups of big and small peys, all carrying lighted torches. Just hearing these stories made one's hair stand on end.

They used to tell a story about the Ayyankaachi troupes in our village. It was my Paatti, Vellaiyamma, who told me this tale too.

'In a certain village, a woman went to her neighbour and said, "Ei, Madani, sister-in-law, my husband's younger brother is getting married tomorrow. I don't have any ornaments to wear to the wedding. He's gone and pawned my paampadam earrings; how can I turn up there wearing no jewels? If the wedding were in my own village, it wouldn't matter, but this is somewhere else, near Marudai. All sorts of people will be there. Lend me your earrings, please; I'll return them safely, as soon as we get back."'

'The wretch went and asked all this thoughtlessly, not even considering it was a Friday, and sunset time, at that. The owner of the jewels was perfectly plain. "How can I give them to you on a Friday, and after the sun has gone down? Couldn't you have asked me a little earlier, at least? Look here, you are leaving on the Marudai bus, aren't you, early tomorrow morning? Come and take the jewels from me before dawn breaks."'

'After talking like this, loud and clear, they each went off to their

homes. But because it was darkening at that time, these peys and demons had overheard them. You must remember that peys are only spirits. They wander about, invisible to our eyes.'

'It was just about midnight. The pey that was the leader of the Ayyankaachi troupe disguised itself as the next-door neighbour and went and knocked at the door of the jewellery owner. Peys can take whatever shape they choose, people say.'

'"Madani, it is time for us to leave on the bus; will you lend me your jewels now?" The pey sounded exactly like the next-door woman. At once the jewellery owner got up and handed over the jewels, half-asleep as she was. The pey took it all away, went to their part of the woods, tried the ornaments out on each and every pey belonging to the troupe, after which they all danced kummis and had a merry old time.'

'The next morning, at cock-crow, the real neighbour hastily put on her sari and went to ask for the loan of the jewellery. And a bitter quarrel got going between the two women. The jewellery owner abused her neighbour roundly, saying she came during the night and took the jewels, and now here she was at daybreak, demanding them again and denying stoutly that she had them already.'

'The neighbour said in her turn "I've never come across anyone as deceitful as this, my God! There are some who claim a blood sacrifice if you merely touch them; this one is like that. My bad luck for having asked her in the first place—I have to listen to an earful of this. Look at the way she tells the bare-faced lie that I went and took the jewels in the middle of the night. One day this woman will die because of her own lies." And so the two of them hurled abuses at each other.'

'As for the jewellery-owner's husband, he began to strike his wife, saying, "Who told you to lend her your jewellery?" Meanwhile the neighbour's husband, in his turn, rained blows on her asking, "Why on earth did you want to borrow that stuff?" And so they all shouted and screamed loud enough to wake up the whole village and to reach the woods beyond; and the entire street came out to watch the fun.'

'In the middle of all this, a man from that village was returning home, spade in hand, after watering his fields during the night. He held in his

hands the very same jewels that the two women were quarrelling about. As soon as they cast their eyes on the jewels, they went completely quiet. Everyone gathered there turned their gaze on the Annaacchi holding the jewels, their mouths gaping open. They all listened absorbed, fingers on their noses, as he gave them his story in detail, morsel by morsel.'

'"Adé, you idiotic females, here you are at each other's throat, fighting and quarrelling uselessly. And all the time the Ayyankaachi troupe was dancing merrily in the woods, playing with the stolen jewels."'

'When Saktimukta, the jewellery owner heard this, she asked in sheer disbelief, "How on earth did the jewellery I gave this woman get into the hands of the peys?"'

'The Annaacchi questioned Saktimukta and her neighbour closely on what happened between them. Then he put two and two together, and explained it all correctly.'

'And how did that Annaacchi explain it all correctly, Paatti?' I asked.

Paatti gave a chuckle. 'One of the peys from the Ayyankaachi troupe overheard what the women were saying at sunset time, and then went in the neighbour's shape to Saktimukta's house in the middle of the night. And Saktimukta too woke up from a deep sleep and gave the ornaments away, thinking it was dawn. The head-strong mundé would have realized the truth if only she had had the sense to check whether the woman at the door had any feet.'

'Why?' I asked.

'Peys don't have any feet, you see. They always stand on air.' I didn't understand what Paatti said. But I was so anxious to know what happened next that I didn't interrupt.

'The pey who took the jewels went straight into the forest, adorned each of the other peys in turn, and they all admired themselves. See how greedy even demons and peys can be!' Paatti gave a lovely toothless grin. I had to laugh.

'At that very moment this Annaacchi came past them, after watering his fields. Wondering what on earth all the racket was about, he switched on the torch he held in his hand. When he saw the peys, it seems the shit in his bowels melted, and he went cold with fear.'

Listening to Paatti, I felt my own stomach churn. I too was frozen with terror.

'As soon as he saw them, though, he began to think hard. Then he took off the *vetti* he had tied around his waist and put it aside. He even snapped off his waist string. Stark naked, he joined the pey troupe and started dancing with them.'

'They have their own songs, those peys. What do you think they sang, as they danced? "Ei, try Saktimukta's jewellery on Anna. Oh, he looks very fine. Ei, try them on *Thambi*. Oh, he looks very fine." And so they tried the ornaments on each one as they danced and sang. Finally they put the jewellery on our Annaacchi. The minute he got his hands on them, he picked up the spade which he had put aside just there, and thrust it among the Ayyankaachi troupe. In that instant, it seems, they all disappeared like magic. The spade was made of iron, you see. Peys are frightened of iron.'

'After that, he put on his clothes and came away, to return the jewels to Saktimukta. The next day, some women from the village who had gone past those woods on their way to work came and reported to the rest what they had seen. Where the Annaacchi struck at the Ayyankaachi troupe, ten or twelve bloodsuckers lay dead, cold and stiff. Didn't I tell you, peys can take any form they choose?'

'From that time, you see, people have been very careful not to say anything out loud, after dark. You should never say loudly, wake me up, I'll wake you up; I'll come now, I'll come then. And if anyone does wake you up from your sleep, you should always look to see whether that person has any feet.'

After Paatti said all this, we younger children never even arranged to wake each other up for the early morning puusai at church. We were afraid that a pey might come and wake us up instead, and carry us away.

The next time Manacchi was possessed, I didn't go and watch her dancing either. From Paatti's tale, I began to wonder how a man could even strike at a pey bravely, while a woman is easily caught and becomes its prey.

And even among women, I never heard of upper-caste women becoming possessed or dancing in a frenzy. The peys always seem set on women from the pallar, paraiyar, chakkiliyar, and koravar communities.

When I asked my mother about all this one day, she said, 'It is our women who go off on their own to work in the jungles and in the fields. Those are the places where peys like to wander about. The peys catch the women when they are alone, without a circle of friends or relations. If they are menstruating, or if they are terrified in the first place, definitely the peys will catch hold of them. Of course peys would catch upper-caste women, too, if they were to go out to work as we do. What do they care who it is? It's just that they don't catch men. And that's because men don't carry the same fear in their hearts. And they won't catch women either, if they dare to walk past without fear.'

As I heard more and more about all this, I began to wonder if there really were peys. I wondered how it was possible for them to disguise themselves as women and then come and borrow jewellery. I told myself that Paatti must have made it all up.

I wondered why peys were frightened of men. I asked myself whether in that case, any and every creature was afraid of men, too? According to my mother, if you have courage in your heart, you can live fearlessly. We need not fear peys and, what's more, neither do we need to fear men. But now we are frightened of the dark of going anywhere alone; they create terrors for you on every side, and wherever you look.

Once a girl comes of age she has no more freedom. They tell us all these stories, take away our freedom, and control our movements. And we too become frightened, we gaze about us in terror, we're afraid of every little thing, we shiver, and die. It isn't for nothing that they say to one who is terrified, that anything dark is a pey. If there isn't courage in our hearts, we lose our strength and become good for nothing. If we are brave enough, we can dare to accomplish anything we want.

As I listened to more of these stories and thought about it all, I was convinced that it was all false. But all the same, I thought about the fact that only women—and Dalit women in particular—become possessed.

And when I examined the lives of our women, I understood the

reason. From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even then they can't go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night they must give in to their husbands' pleasure. Even if a woman 's body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his own satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys.

Our men don't have the same problem. Even if they work really hard, they still have their freedom. They still control their women, rule over them, and find their pleasure. Within the home, they lay down the law; their word is scripture.

I decided then that it is up to us to be aware of our situation, and not fool ourselves that we have been possessed by peys. We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive.

CHAPTER SIX

My Paatti kept on going out to work until she was quite old. Although she lived on her own, she went out and gathered firewood, lit her own hearth, and cooked and ate her kanji. Her hot *kuzhambu* flavoured with dried fish was just so delicious. Even after she had lost her teeth, whenever they butchered a cow on Sundays, she bought the intestines and made a kuzhambu out of that. Whenever she cooked a meat kuzhambu, she poured some of it into a container and brought it over to us.

So, I was sitting in Paatti's house one day, eating a *ragi kali* along with a kuzhambu of intestines. Soon, Mariamma came and joined us. Paatti had invited her to come and eat, as she was pregnant at that time. Paatti served her some kali. We were still eating when Chadachi from the West Street came by.

'Ei, Mariamma, is this where you are hiding out? I've just been to your home, looking for you.' Chadachi sat down in the *thinnai* of Paatti's house.

'Why were you looking for me, Akka?' Mariamma asked.

'Well, haven't you heard the news? That girl, Raakkamma and her husband have got into a fierce fight. The whole street is in a commotion.'

'Who is Raakkamma?'

'It's that woman who got married on the same day as you, remember? The woman from Kuppacchipatti.'

Paatti put in, 'When did those donkeys from that place ever stop quarrelling? All the same, that fellow Paakkiaraj shouldn't be so cruel to

her. There's not a day when he isn't drunk and violent. And she, poor woman, goes on living with him and putting up with it. Had it been me, I'd have left him within three days of marrying him.'

'Do you think Raakkamma is such a quiet creature? You'd know better if you watched them closely. My house is opposite hers. There's a regular racket going on there every day.' Chadachi took a handful of kali from Mariamma's plate and popped it into her mouth.

I bolted down my meal as fast as I could and ran off to watch the fight. Paakkiaraj was abusing her in a vile and vulgar way, and was just about to hit her. And Raakkamma was giving it back to him, word for word. Even before his hand could fall on her, she screamed and shrieked, 'Ayyayyo, he's killing me. Vile man, you'll die, you'll be carried out as a corpse, you low-life, you bastard, you this you that...'

'Listen to the common whore shouting, even before I touch her! Shut your mouth, you whore! Otherwise I'll stamp so hard on your stomach, your guts will scatter everywhere!'

But Raakkamma wouldn't leave him alone. 'Go on, da, kick me, let's see you do it, da! Let's see if you are a real man. You only know how to go for a woman's parts. Go and fight with a man who is your equal, and you'll see. You'll get your balls burnt for your pains. Look at the fellow's face! Thuu!' And she spat at him.

Paakkiaraj's fury was beyond everything. 'Is she a woman, to talk to me like this! The savage mundé. Keep all your arrogance in your parents' house in Kuppacchipatti. Don't try all that here or I'll crush you to pieces with a single stamp. Remember that!' Then he dragged her by her hair, pushed her down, and kicked her lower belly.

Raakkamma got up after that kick and wailed out aloud. She shouted obscenities, she scooped out the earth and flung it about. 'How dare you kick me, you low-life? Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to drink a woman's farts! Instead of drinking toddy everyday, why don't you drink your son's urine? Why don't you drink my monthly blood?' And she lifted up her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there.

That was when Paakkiaraj walked off, still shouting. All the women

began to speak amongst themselves. 'Is this a woman or what? That Chinnayyan Mudiappan, the teacher, and all our brothers are standing around. So casually she lifted up her sari in front of them all. Shameless donkey! Children from the school are coming and going along the streets. What an uncontrollable shrew she is!'

Immediately Raakkamma rounded on them. 'Why don't you lot just go off and mind your own business? It is I who am beaten to death every day. If I hadn't shamed him like this, he would surely have split my skull in two, the horrible man.'

At first, when I saw what Raakkamma did, I too was disgusted, and thought to myself, 'Chi, how can she expose herself like that?' But later, I realized that it was only after she screamed and shouted and behaved like that that he let her go. I realized that she acted in that way because it was her only means of escape.

There were fights between husbands and wives in our streets, daily, just like this. One evening, after we had our kanji, we girls were playing a game where you had to cover your eyes and say, 'Oh Rose, come softly, go gently.' Suddenly a woman thudded past us, running as fast as she could. She was pregnant, besides. Right behind her, her husband came chasing, a stick of firewood in his hand. Luckily there were some men standing about in the *chavadi*, the community centre, who intervened and plucked away the firewood from the man's hand. Even then he wouldn't stop. He caught up with the woman and dragged her along by the hair, abusing her. 'Where are you running away, di? Don't think you'll escape my hands, wherever you go, you slut! How dare you defy me!'

Because she was heavily pregnant, her whole stomach dragged on the earth as he pulled her along. Shocked at the sight, people shouted at him, 'You brute, you animal, haven't you got even a drop of human feeling or compassion in you? How can you torture her like that, without even caring that she's pregnant?'

Instantly he replied, 'If I let the whore go, she'll surely run away.' Then he lifted her by her hair and carried her off like that. She screamed, overcome by the pain of it. Even then, he wouldn't let her go. He carried her home, just like that, flung her inside, locked the door, and beat her

some more, the horrible wretch. Those of us who saw what was going on just wept.

When people went to the girl's parents and complained, they answered casually, as if it were an everyday affair, 'This is the bridegroom she chose for herself. Did we arrange her marriage for her? When she ran away with him, she didn't feel any pain, did she? Now she is being destroyed by him. So what can we do about it?'

The people who came spoke up, 'There's only one thing wrong the girl did, in any case, to deserve all this. She started all this fuss and argument by asking him to give her his wages. If the wretched fool had let him keep his wages and not asked, she wouldn't have been beaten up in this shameful way.'

'If a man goes off with the money he has earned, drinks as much as he likes, and eats in coffee-stands and food-stalls, then how can a woman go out to work and earn enough money to fill her children's bellies and do whatever else is necessary in the house? How can she manage everything with just her wages?'

But what they said had no effect, so they went home.

On the other hand, the quarrels between our neighbour Kaaliamma and her husband Chinnappan were quite comic. When I watched them, I wasn't so disturbed inside myself. Because Kaaliamma was ready to fight, one to one, head-on. Sometimes, she was the one who came out victorious. If he hit her, she was ready to strike him back. Perhaps because of this, their quarrels remained within the bounds of words. They seldom came to blows.

One day, Chinnappan was sitting in front of their house, slicing up a bottle-gourd. Kaaliamma, returning from her evening task of collecting water, came upon him like this, and immediately started ranting. 'Look, I've stood in a mile-long queue until my legs grew numb, fought with those mundés there, and finally made it home with the water. And what about you? Here you are, calmly sitting down with the *sorakkai*; you haven't even bothered to stoke the fire, and it's burnt itself out. Why should I be the only person to take all this trouble? Don't you think I could have cut up the sorakkai after I came home? I put the rice on to

boil before I set out, and now it's all burnt and spoilt. I too went and worked all day in the fields in the baking heat; I too came home half-dead. But after that, just to make you a decent meal, I've had to rush about for firewood and water; I've even had to go to the shops. Can't you realize that I'm only an ordinary woman? You went off like a big mudalaali and bathed in the lake, and sat down to slice your sorakkai.' Still scolding, she set the water pot from her hip very gently on to the ground, and then lifted down the big mud pot from her head with a clang.

Chinnappan was furious. He began to shout back at her. 'Here I am, trying to help you out of sheer kindness, and all you can do is to complain. Just watch out that I don't throw the vegetable slicer at you.'

At this point, Parvati Kizhavi intervened, saying, 'Why do you quarrel with him, di, when he's only trying to help you?'

'I've had enough of his help, slicing vegetables, Paatti. I've spent the whole day cleaning and toiling; I've brought home a big bundle of thorns and sticks. I lit the fire and set the rice to boil before going out, and now it is all spoilt. Now I have to light the hearth all over again. The wretched thorns and sticks are all green. My sides ache from blowing at them.' Kaaliamma was trying to get the fire going again as she poured all this out.

She was a sorry sight, surrounded by smoke as she struggled with the fire. Chinnappan himself made another suggestion. 'Ei, tha, pour a little kerosene on it, if you have any, it will catch straight away.'

'As if he's kept aside a tin of kerosene, just so that I could pour it on, whenever I need to. Don't even pretend to be a man when you go outside the house. I saved a hundred rupees bit by bit, the way an ant collects grains, and bought a chit. You took even that away, and all you did with it was to fill your belly and fart. Don't you dare to talk. Just have the decency to return my money. Otherwise, you won't know what has hit you.' She bent down and began to blow at the hearth.

'Your money is worth the hair on the back of my legs, di. If I ever come across any big money, I'll throw it your way in a couple of days. You can catch it respectfully, from a distance.' He finished slicing the sorakkai. Then he added, 'You don't even know how to light a fire, and

you claim to be a woman in this world.' He lit a bidi for himself, and went off towards the chavadi.

Now he would return just as she had finished cooking the rice, and was taking the curry off the fire, and he would eat until he could eat no more. When I saw him swaggering off with the bidi in his mouth, I was full of anger, too. I scolded him silently, 'Just look at him, useless man.'

It was always like this in our streets. Although both men and women came home after a hard day's work in the fields, the men went off straight away to the bazaar or the chavadi to while away their time, coming home only for their meal. But as for the women, from the minute they returned home they washed vessels, cleaned the house, collected water, gathered firewood, went to the shops to buy rice and other provisions, boiled some rice, made a kuzhambu or a kanji, fed husband and children before they could eat what was left over, and go to bed.

Even if they lay down with bodies wracked with pain, they weren't allowed to sleep. Whether she died or survived, he had to finish his business. When I thought about all this, I was often disgusted by this daily routine. Men at least, I thought, had a better time of it.

Nowadays, when I reflect on how the men in our streets went about drinking and beating their wives, I wonder whether all that violence was because there was nowhere else for them to exert their male pride or to show off their authority. All that suppressed anger was vented when they came home and beat up their wives to a pulp.

Even though they are male, because they are Dalits, they have to be like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances. So they show it at home on their wives and children. But then, is it the fate of our women to be tormented both outside their houses and within?

Thinking about it, I have to say that even if all women are slaves to men, our women really are the worst sufferers. It is not the same for women of other castes and communities. Our women cannot bear the torment of upper-caste masters in the fields, and at home they cannot bear the violence of their husbands.

Besides all this, upper-caste women show us no pity or kindness either, if only as women to women, but treat us with contempt, as if we are creatures of a different species, who have no sense of honour or self-respect. They themselves lead lives shut up inside their houses, eating, gossiping, and doing their husbands' bidding, and then they treat us like this. God knows how they stay shut up within four walls, all twenty-four hours of the day.

From this perspective, it seems to me that at least our women work hard and earn their own money, and have a few coins in their hands. They don't hold out their palms to their husbands for every little expense, like those others. All the same, because of our caste and because of our poverty, every fellow treats us with contempt. If ever there is a problem or a disturbance, everyone, starting with the police, chooses to blame and humiliate the women of our community. The government does not seem prepared to do anything to redress this. So we must take up the challenge ourselves.

It's like the proverb that says, if a man sees a terrified dog, he is bound to chase it. If we continue to be frightened, everyone will take advantage of us. If we stand up for ourselves without caring whether we die or survive, they'll creep away with their tails between their legs.

Another proverb says, so long as it is hidden in the earth, it claims to be big, but when you start peeling it, it's nothing but skin. These fellows are just like that—like onions. They'll shout themselves hoarse, making great claims. They'll forbid us to speak a word. They'll seethe like cobras and say that they alone own everything. But why should we hide our own skills and capabilities? We work just as hard as they do. Why, you could even say we actually work harder. Ask them to do all that we do in a day—care for the children, look after the house, and do all the chores. They'll collapse after a single day of it, and that will be the end of their big talk and their fat arses. But they are not going to think of all this easily nor by themselves. It is we who must uphold our rights. We must stand up for ourselves and declare that we too are human beings like everyone else. If we believe that someone else is going to come and uplift us, then we are doomed to remain where we are, forever.

Upper-caste women give the superficial impression that they never quarrel amongst themselves nor with their husbands. They claim that it is only in our streets that there are fights and vulgar quarrels all the time. It is only when you go inside their homes that the real truth is revealed. It's as the saying goes: It looks a stylish hair-knot, decorated with screwpine flowers; but it's all lice and nits within. They submit to their husbands like cobras that shrink back into their boxes. And they have to do that. Because it is the money that he gives her that drives the cart. It's because of this that she even stands and sits according to his orders.

But in our streets, men and women both go out and earn. Most of the men, though, never give their wages to their women. It is the woman who looks after everything in the house. So, on top of all this, why must she submit to being beaten and stamped upon for no rhyme or reason? That's why she quarrels with him. If he shows his strength of muscle, she reveals the sharpness of her tongue. Because she can't hit him back, she curses him roundly. What else can she do?

All the same, all our women are not like this. Most of them put up with all that violence and suffer a life of hellish torment. On the one side she is worn out with physical toil, on the other, she is beaten until she is left with only a half or a quarter life. I don't know when we will be free of all this. We must somehow dare to take control of our lives. Then, as the proverb says, 'Even the ocean will support us, if we only dare.'

The fights and quarrels in our streets always happen at dawn, or at dusk, when it is growing dark. When I asked myself why it was that in our streets there is so much commotion and such chaos just during those hours, I thought at first that it was because everyone was out at work during the rest of the time; quarrels broke out when they were all back and out on the streets. But gradually I came to understand the real reason.

The women never got a proper night's peace and quiet after working hard all day. They had to pleasure their husbands whenever they demanded it so they never got any rest. Neither their bodies nor their minds felt rested when they woke up. Promptly they vented their irritation by quarrelling with everyone they met. And then after this bout of useless wrangling, they had to run to their work.

When they come home after an arduous day's toil, there is only more and unending work. From all sides they have to deal with the pestering of children and the anger and unfair domination of their husbands. Their lives are unceasingly tedious. When they are so frustrated by all this, they are driven to venting their bitterness by quarrelling and shouting.

When you examine the words they use in their quarrels, you will notice they are full of obscenities, very direct and ugly, often dealing with sexual relations. No matter what the quarrel is about, once they open their mouths, the same four-letter words will spill out. I sometimes think that because they have neither pleasure nor fulfilment in their own sexual lives, they derive a sort of bitter comfort by using these terms of abuse which are actually names of their body parts.

And not just this. A woman will create all hell if her husband actually takes a mistress. But when she's quarrelling with any woman at all, she'll unhesitatingly call her, 'my husband's whore'. When you think about it, it's as if she admits her own helplessness, and gets some sort of satisfaction by suggesting that her husband has controlled that other woman, and sexually at that. Even here, it is the man's maleness and power that takes precedence. A woman's body, mind, feelings, words and deeds, and her entire life are all under his control and domination. And we too have accepted what they want us to believe—that this is actually the right way, that our happiness lies in being enslaved to men. But if only we were to realize that we too have our self-worth, honour, and self-respect, we could manage our own lives in our own way.

Somehow or other, by shouting and fighting first thing at dawn and last thing at night, if need be, our women survive without going crazy. If we are to live at all, we have to shout and shriek to keep ourselves sane. Upper-caste women, though, keep it all suppressed; they can neither chew nor swallow. They lose their nerve, and many of them become unstable or mentally ill. If you look at it like that, our women have an abundant will to survive however hard they might have to struggle for their last breath. Knowingly or unknowingly, we find ways of coping in the best way we can.

CHAPTER seven

There's a little girl called Maikkanni who lives in the house next to mine. A bright-eyed child, smart as anything. She is eleven years old, but is so small and shrunken, if you saw her you'd take her for seven or eight. She is the eldest child in their house; there are five younger children, three boys and two girls.

I have known Maikkanni from the day she was born. Her mother and I are the same age. Only two years after her mother came of age, she ran off with Maikkanni's father. Those two had known each other for a long time. But neither of their families wanted them to marry, so one day they went off together to another town, and returned home some days later. After that, they were happy until Maikkanni was born. Perhaps she was born unlucky, who knows, but soon after that her father became friendly with another woman, and now he wanders between the two wives. He comes home whenever he feels like it, and goes off again, leaving her mother with a child in her belly every time. Now she's pregnant for the seventh time. After this one, she says, she'll go in for birth control.

So far she has put off sterilization because it would stop her from doing the heavy work in the fields. If she is laid up, the children will just starve to death. They are still quite tiny. She says she can have it done now, because Maikkanni has grown up a bit, and can go out to work.

Maikkanni's real name is Seyarani. But nobody ever called her that. Her eyes look beautiful, as if they are outlined in *mai*, and that's why her name became Maikkanni. Her face is as sparkling as the clear running

water in a stream. Her eyes always seem to shine with light, at any time. The women of our streets used to say, 'If this child had been born an upper caste, she would have been even more smart. Even now, what's missing? When she comes of age, the boys will be fighting each other to snatch her off.'

The day Maikkanni learnt to walk, she started to work as well. Her mother had to go out to work in the fields. It was Maikkanni who looked after all the tasks at home.

From the time she woke up, she sprinkled the front yard with water and swept it, and then carried on with all the housework: swept the rest of the house, scrubbed the cooking pots, collected water, washed clothes, gathered firewood, went to the shops, cooked the kanji. She did it all, one after the other.

Whenever her mother has a baby, Maikkanni goes off to our neighbouring town to work in the match factory because her mother cannot go to work in the fields then. At that time, they managed entirely on what Maikkanni earned. I used to feel really sorry for that child because she worked in the factory all day, and then came home and did all the housework as well. But do you know, she used to say, 'Who does my mother have, except me? My father has left us. I must see to everything.' So responsible was she.

After she delivered the next child, the mother would go back to her work in the fields. Maikkanni then stopped working in the match factory, looked after the children, and did all the housework. I used to feel so sorry for her. She's such a young child, I used to think, yet she raises the little ones herself, and does everything in the house besides.

Whenever she had some free time, she always came to my house. I could have listened to her all day without getting bored, as she chattered away. And when she rocked the baby in its cradle and sang lullabies, her voice was good to hear, as clear as a bell. Her mother had a good voice, too.

She always called me Perimma, mother's elder sister. Once I asked her, 'Ei, tha, Maikkanni, which do you like better, working in the fields or working at the match factory?'

'I prefer working in the fields, Perimma. But there's just one thing I like about going to the factory.'

'And what's that?'

'Shall I tell you? I like going in the bus to the match factory. It's the first time I've had a chance to go in a bus. And have you seen our bus? It's "super"! You know the Marudai bus that sets off at morning, at cock-crow? Our bus comes here even before that. And our bus is even bigger than that Marudai bus.'

She spoke as if that factory bus was her very own. 'If you are going to the fields, you can even set off after daybreak. But if you want to go to the match factory, you must set off while it is still dark. Otherwise you won't find a seat on the bus. And if you are even slightly late, it will go off and not wait. If I miss the bus, my mother will kill me, she'll beat me so hard. So even if I feel so sleepy I can hardly open my eyes, I get up all the same, pour some kuuzh into a container, and run with it.'

'Your mother was saying that you get a pain in your guts from working in the match factory.'

'Yes, Perimma. The stink from the drugs they use pulls at my guts. But what to do, I must work there until I'm a little older. Then I can start working in the fields. If I go to the fields now, the landlord refuses to let me work, because I'm too little. But you'll see children working in the match factory who are even younger than me.'

For Maikkanni, going to the match factory every day was like making a trip to the town. Somehow she managed to earn forty or fifty rupees a week. Every Saturday she brought her wages home and handed it to her mother. Once, though, her father waylaid her as she was coming home on a Saturday evening, and left her in a flood of tears.

Later on she herself came and told me all about it. 'Perimma, my Ayya beat me today because I took a rupee out of my wages and spent it. You see, today all the other children bought and ate ice. They call it cone-ice or something? That ice man is a funny fellow, Perimma. He pulls out a golden brown cone smartly, fills it with ice cream as white as white and as smooth as smooth like a kuuzh made of raw rice, and then hands it out, one at a time....It's as sweet as anything. You know the brown cone

thing under the ice, you can eat that up as well, in the end. At first, I didn't know how to hold it and to eat the ice cream. But I watched what the others did, and learnt to lick it and eat it. If you had seen me you really would have laughed! I wanted to laugh, myself.' The memory of that ice cream and how she had eaten it made her forget even her father's blows.

'How did your Ayya get to know that you had spent a rupee out of your wages? Why did you have to tell him?' I asked her.

'He comes here every now and then to make trouble for my Amma or myself, Perimma. He went and checked out the notebook in which they note down our wages and found out how much was due to me. My Ayya went to school up to the fifth class, no?' She spoke of him with some respect.

But her voice sounded weary when she spoke again, after a while. 'I don't know whose face I saw this morning when I woke up, Perimma; it's been blows and scoldings all day.'

'Why, child, what else happened today?'

'I was the first one to climb into the factory bus this morning, so I rushed to find myself a window seat. But the boys from Kakkalayakkudi who arrived after I did, pushed me away and grabbed all the window seats. They always insist on sitting there.'

'And did you just let them get away with it?'

'I called them all sorts of rude names and said I wouldn't move. But those horrible boys just pulled me away and took my place.'

'And is this why you are saying your whole day went wrong?'

'No, it wasn't just that. First the *maistri*-Annaacchi beat me in the factory, and now my father has just beaten me!' Her eyes filled as she spoke, and she lifted up her skirt to wipe them. I was very disturbed to see this.

'Why did the maistri beat you, child?'

'He beat me twice, Perimma. The first time was when I was sticking the matchbox labels, and he saw me throwing away two labels because I had used too much paste. He gave me a sharp knock on my skull. My whole head felt as if it was spinning. I'm only small, can I stand it

when a big man like that hits me? You tell me.' She rubbed her head.

I was troubled to see her like this. At an age when she should have been running about at her own will like a little calf, and playing games, here she was, putting up with all this.

'And why did he hit you the second time?'

'Oh, the second time? Halfway through the morning, I was desperate to "go". I did as I usually do in our village—I went under a tree, and wiped myself with a stone. Someone seems to have gone and complained to him. That's why he beat me then, just for shitting outside.' She was quiet for a while. In spite of herself, her eyes streamed. Once again she wiped them, and told me, 'I wake up at cock-crow, get ready and run, Perimma. I really don't have time then to go out. So far, I've never had to "go" during factory hours. I just control myself until I can come home and go into the woods here. But today I just couldn't hold out. That's why I went outside.'

She looked woebegone as she told me all this, but suddenly she had a smile on her face. She asked me, 'Perimma, shall I tell you something?' Without telling me what it was about, she began laughing so hard she could not carry on. Even though I hadn't the least idea what it was all about, I couldn't help joining in.

My mother who was listening to all this interrupted us, 'Silly girl! Look here, tell us about it and then laugh.' But by this time, even she couldn't help laughing.

Still laughing, Maikkanni came close to me and whispered, 'In our factory, they've built a special room which is the shit-room. It seems you must go and do your number one and number two only there.' She burst into loud hoots of laughter. Listening to her, we too had to fall about with giggles.

It was Maikkanni who brought up all the five children who were born after her; her mother delivered them into the world and could do no more. Just as soon as one child began to walk, she was ready to deliver the next.

Returning home from the factory one day, Maikkanni came to our house in a great state of excitement. 'Perimma, have you seen the movie

Vira? The one in which the "superstar" Rajnikanth acts? Today they played songs from that film, in our factory, the whole day. Do you know how wonderful they are? They make my mouth water while I listen.'

'Are they as good as pickles or what, to make your mouth water like that?' I asked her. 'So they play songs at your factory, then?'

'What do you think of our factory? Every day they play new songs. We listen, and we work fast. That's why. In maistri-Annaacchi's room there's even a fan. It twirls round so fast. There's a fan in the room where we work too. But it doesn't go as fast. We don't get any cool air at all.'

My mother commented, 'So what else do you want? They seem to have given you every comfort.'

'Oh no, Paatti, it's all rubbish; you can throw all that on the rubbish heap! If you had been there yesterday, you'd have seen a real fight going on. All the children from our streets refused to work; we even picked up our tiffin carriers and were ready to walk out.'

'Why, tha, what did they do to you?'

'The children from some other village called one of us from our streets—Bernath's granddaughter, that is—a paraiya, and abused her. When she told us about it, we all stood up and started shouting back the rudest words we knew. We were prepared to fight each of them to death, and we told them that. When the maistri saw what was going on, he pleaded with us to stop it. But did we do that? Never, we said, and we picked up our carriers saying we were prepared to walk all the way home if we had to.' Maikkanni smiled with pride.

'So when did you stop, finally?'

'We gave up at last because of the look on that Annaacchi's face. The whole day he pleaded with us, let it go, amma, please let it go. He said if they ever abused us again, he would deal with it himself. So at last we stopped our shouting.'

'Who were those other children, anyway?' my mother asked her.

'I don't know who they were, Paatti, but most definitely they were not from the paraiya community.'

'How can you be so sure about it, tha?'

'You see, our children always walk with firm strides. Just you watch

those others—they go bending and swaying.' She left us after that, and went home.

I turned to my mother and remarked, 'Such a young child, and she talks so smartly, doesn't she, Amma?'

'But did she tell you what happened last week when she went to gather firewood in the karuvelam woods?'

'No, she didn't!'

'It seems she and four or five others went into the woods to gather those thorny twigs. It seems there was some fellow standing there, who called her to one side.' As my mother began her story, Maikkanni returned with a younger sister on her hip.

'Here she is herself. Why don't you ask her?'

When I did so, Maikkanni went on with the story. 'Yes, Perimma, we went there, and began gathering twigs. That man called me and said there was plenty further along within the woods. We all began to set off there. At once he told the others to stay where they were and said I alone was allowed to go further into the woods. I was wearing a skirt that someone had given me, in a thin material, and I had nothing on underneath. I said to my friends, this man seems to be a nasty fellow, up to something or other. They also advised me, "Don't go, tha, why is he asking only you to go there?" So we gathered together all the sticks we had collected, and just ran away from the place as fast as we could.'

Reflecting on all that had happened to this child at such a young age, I was filled with pain on the one hand, and wonder on the other. If she was required to work far harder than her years demanded, she also behaved with a commonsense far beyond her years.

In our streets the girls hardly ever enjoy a period of childhood. Before they can sprout three tender leaves, so to speak, they are required to behave like young women, looking after the housework, taking care of babies, going out to work for daily wages. Yet, in spite of all their suffering and pain one cannot but be delighted by their sparkling words, their firm tread, and their bubbling laughter.

There are many children like Maikkanni in our streets who work so hard both inside their home and outside, when they are still so young. I have seen boys eating their fill and playing about. But a girl, even though she can scarcely walk herself, will go around carrying a baby brother or sister; or she'll carry a water pot, she'll pluck grass for the cow, and gather firewood for the hearth.

And in spite of all this, Maikkanni was always laughing and chattering. However hard she worked, she never lost her cheerfulness. She often turned up at our house suddenly. She'd say to my father, 'Thaatha, look at me, I've combed my hair right back and put flowers in it. Don't I look like Jayalalitha?' And she would turn her head sharply from side to side.

'Perimma, have you seen my sister Amalorpavam today? She looks exactly like Kushpu, the actress. An amma from the Nayakkar street gave us an old frock. I put it on her, and she looks "super"'. She always carried on like this, laughing and chattering.

The women were like this too. Even though they left at dawn and hardly ever came back until after dark, they still went about laughing and making a noise for the greater part.

They sang all the time at work, too, so that the woods rang out to the sound of their laughter as they made up songs and words to tease each other.

Once, they said, as the women were setting off to weed the groundnut fields, one of the women covered her head the way Muslim women do. Apparently, the sun wasn't even particularly high at the time. At once, Innasi's daughter, Arokkya Mary made up a song to tease her:

Along the path the flowers spread
So many, beyond measure.
Help me pluck them, Muslim girl,
I'll share them with you.

In the same way, after the betrothal ceremony for Gnanappu's daughter, Ranjitham, the women who worked with her made up a song teasing her because her prospective bridegroom was darker than she was:

Handsome man, dark as a crow
More handsome than a blackened pot
I have given you my promise
You who can read Ingilissu.

The hit in the last line was because the boy had been to school up to the eighth class, so he could read some English.

They never let anyone off. Here's a song about a man who took a mistress after he got married:

Eighteen sweet paniyaaram
You handed to her, across the wall
But whatever you might give away
You still are my husband.

Another song was about a man who walked off in anger, after making a huge fuss over a mere trifle:

As we cleaned our teeth
In the spring by the river
Is it because I spluttered over you
You haven't talked to me for eight days?

The women always sang songs and laughed like this, while weeding, transplanting rice, cutting the crops at harvest time, or doing anything else. They always teased each other through their songs.

Once, while a woman was grinding masalas in the middle of the street, her cousin, to whom she was promised in marriage, went past. At once, Mogurkari, who was playing a dice game, began to sing:

In front of a house made of plaster and lime
You were grinding turmeric for a curry.
What magic powder did he cast on you
You cannot move the grindstone any more.

That poor girl was meekly grinding away, minding her own business. How cheeky of Mogurkari to make up a song like that, on the spot!

I really don't know how they could make up songs like that, in an

instant, quick as anything. Maikkanni too, knew all sorts of songs and her mother was excellent at stringing together tunes and words. It was delightful, always, to hear her sing.

In the same way, they used to sing lullabies, rorattu songs, to the babies in their cradles. When I heard the older women sing, I could feel myself being overcome by sleep. Their songs were so bewitching.

If anyone died, the women sang oppaaris and wept loudly. Thinking about it, from birth to death, there are special songs and dances. And it's the women who perform them. Rorattu to oppaari, it is the women who sing them.

When I was small, although all of us had many tasks at home, after we drank our kanji in the evenings, we could always play to our hearts' content. The boys played their own games while we played ours in our own way.

But nowadays when you look at our streets, you'll see that it's only the boys who can be seen at play. Many of the girls wake up at cock-crow and work in the match factory all day, so they go to sleep immediately after their evening kanji, or even without drinking it. There aren't so many boys who go to work at the factories from our streets. In the old days, the little girls could be seen carrying babies around, and caring for them. Now, because they are always at work, the streets are full of two and three-year-olds, staggering about by themselves, or crawling like crabs. From morning to night they wander about with the street dogs and pigs, like dogs and pigs themselves. When their mothers return from work, they are picked up and carried around for a little while. After that, the women have their work cut out, they cannot care for their children. As for the fathers, it never seems to strike them to carry the children around. They go off immediately to the shops and other meeting places, returning only to eat and to go to sleep. It's the women who have to struggle with childcare and everything else. Yet how many jobs they are able to do simultaneously, spinning about like tops! Even machines can't do as much.

CHAPTER eight

Paatti and I went together to the fields to pick up cow dung. The cows often dropped their dung as they grazed there. We used to gather up the dry dung, and bring it home to burn in our hearths. If the landlord saw us, though, he used to get furious. It could be good manure for the land, you see, if it just lay there. That's why.

In the field next to the one where we were gathering fuel, the old woman we called Big Stomach Kizhavi was grazing her buffalo. When Paatti saw her, she called out, 'Edi, Muukkamma, aren't you going home at all, to drink your kanji-ginji? It's nearly sunset time.'

'I must let the buffalo graze just a little longer before I lead it home, madani. Look at its stomach, it's fallen in.' Then she added, 'Tha, the stupid animal won't stay still in one place. Can I run along the boundary ridge and chase it from one field to the next?' She moved the buffalo along, speaking to herself and stopping it from grazing in the cotton fields nearby.

It was only when Paatti called out to her that I realized her name was Muukkamma. We children only knew her as Big Stomach Kizhavi. In fact, she didn't have a particularly big stomach. I didn't know whether she might have been given this name when she was a child. Paatti, hard at work, told me, 'This Muukkamma has fallen on evil days now. But you should have seen her as a young girl! She was even better looking than the Ayyar children. Her family celebrated her wedding in great style. The whole village said that when she and the groom came round in procession after their wedding, they were as fine-looking as Shiva and Parvati.'

'When you say the wedding was celebrated in grand style, you mean they went in procession round the village in a car?'

'In our community, who ever brought a car for a wedding celebration? Of course not! No, they walked round like everyone else. But they cooked real rice and served it to their guests.'

I wanted to laugh when she said this. I teased her. 'Ei, Paatti, are you saying they had a grand wedding just because they served real rice? That happens quite often now, you know!'

'But in those days, it was very rare, tha. There was a real famine then.'

I was turning over some dung that hadn't dried properly, and beating the centipede underneath with a lump of dried clay.

'Don't play about now, just get on smartly with the work. If the landlord turns up suddenly, he'll pluck away all the dung we've collected so far.' Paatti went a little further along. She said, 'It was your mother's wedding that turned into a real disaster. We found it really hard to get any rice in those days.'

'So what happened at my mother's wedding, Paatti?' I went and sat on the ridge just beyond where she stood.

'It was a terrible famine at that time. We winnowed grass seeds and cooked that for the wedding. We couldn't afford a proper pandal, so we made one out of *cholam* stalks.'

'When did my mother get married, Paatti?'

'How can I remember all that? But the year after she married, they were saying in the fields and everywhere that—who's that man—yes, the one they call Gandhi Thaatha—was shot and killed. She got married just a little while before he died.'

'So what gifts and things did you give her?'

'O, just like everybody else in the village, I gave her a bronze bowl, two brass tumblers, a wide-mouthed vessel, a copper water pot, and a tall bronze pot. On top of all that, I gave her a grinding stone as well. And that's why your Perimma got into a fight with me.'

'Why was she angry?'

'I didn't give her a grinding slab when she got married, that's why. But your father gave a *parisam* gift of fifty-one rupees at the betrothal

ceremony. So we had to buy bridal gifts to match that, didn't we? What did your Perimma's husband give as parisam, after all?'

'Didn't you give my mother a gold chain, and such things?'

'In our community, who gives a chain for the neck? All that is for the land-owning households. But it's not as if your mother went with nothing in her ears, is it? She went off with ear ornaments, a nose-stud, anklets, and all that. Among us, we don't make a big deal out of bridal gifts. The bridegroom gives a parisam, you see. We buy what we can out of that money. That's all.' Paatti thrust most of the dung we had collected into the sack she had brought, and tied it up. She tied some of it in a small cloth for me. And so we went home, carrying our bundles.

'In those days, didn't the guest give the *moi* presentation money, Paatti?' I asked on our way home.

'O, they certainly had the moi presentation. But in our day, they never called out the amounts over the radio. We never had radios and gideos in our time.' Paatti meant a loudspeaker when she said radio.

'What they did in those days was to make some rice and cook a curry of brinjal or pumpkin, do a rasam. That's what they served. After that, the bridegroom would sit down with a big bronze bowl in front of him. The guests would put a five or a ten into the bowl after they had dinner. And that was it. That was the moi ceremony.'

'Nowadays, Paatti, a man will call out over the mike, "O, all of you, family and kin gathered here at the wedding of such and such, son of such and such, so and so gives a moi of this many rupees." Then all the people there will shout out, "*Nalla kaariyam*, Well done!" And the women will raise a kulavai.'

'Yes, I know. It's only in these times that they shout loud enough for seven villages roundabout to hear all about it. They want all the other caste people to know that a paraiya has got married. You should just tell these silly fellows to get lost.' By this time we had reached her house and she went inside. I walked on home.

As soon as I was back, I peeled a couple of onions and ate them with my kuuzh. My mother was stripping drumstick leaves from their stalks for our evening meal. I took one of the green chillies that she had kept

ready, bit into it, and asked, 'Why, Ma, Paatti was telling me that at your wedding they could only afford grass-seed rice!'

'Yes, in those days we used to go with our brooms and winnowing trays, dig into the ant-pits, sweep them out and bring away what we found. We sifted out the grass seeds that the ants had gathered, and found enough to feed one person in each of our families. There was a terrible famine at that time.'

After I finished my kanji, I helped my mother to prepare the greens. Just then, a man went along our street, calling out loudly, 'Tonight, parisam gifts will be presented to Muttharasi, daughter of Sakkarai of East Street. All are invited.'

I asked my mother, 'Who is Sakkarai, Amma?'

'You know the fellow who tried to catch the bull at the *jallikattu* games last Thai-*pongal*, and was laid up after he was gored in the thigh? They are arranging his daughter's wedding, di. It's no more than two or three months since she came of age. As soon as a reasonable bridegroom showed up, they must have settled for him quickly.' She went to light the hearth.

I popped a small piece of tamarind into my mouth and went off sucking it, to play with my friends, next to the chavadi. After a while, some of us, two or three children and I, went to the house where the parisam was to be given.

They had built a cooking hearth outside the house, and Muttharasi's mother and aunt were preparing a meal. Muttharasi was sitting down, chopping up brinjal. Just then, some of the elders of the village arrived, accompanying the elder naattaamai, the younger naattaamai, and Muttharasi's maternal uncle. The bridegroom's father, Mutthirulan was among them. Neither the bridegroom himself nor his mother were present. Mutthirulan carried a presentation platter in his hands, containing a betrothal sari, material for a ravikkai, a bundle of betel leaves, some betel nuts, a bunch of bananas, a coconut, and the parisam money of a hundred and one rupees.

Muttharasi stopped chopping vegetables, went inside, brought out a mat and spread it out in front of the house. Everyone sat down. Muttharasi's

father, Sakkarai, came out and sat down with them. Immediately after that, the elder naattaamai took the presentation tray from Mutthirulan, asked the maternal uncle for his consent, and then placed the tray in Sakkarai's hands.

After Sakkarai had taken the tray, Mutthirulan and the naattaamai conferred together, agreed that the wedding would take place the following Vaiyasi, on the tenth. They left soon after this. Then the bundle of betel leaves from the parisam plate was untied and a man was sent with the betel leaves to all the houses in our streets. Whenever a parisam took place, all our houses received a share of the betel leaves.

As soon as I returned home, I asked, 'Well, Amma, where's the betel from the parisam?'

'Your Paatti has just been here and collected it.'

My Paatti could survive without kanji or water, if need be, but never without her betel leaf, nut, and tobacco.

We had our school holidays during the month of Vaiyasi. During that vacation there usually were several weddings in our streets. Two or three months before that, the parisams would have been held and the brides and grooms decided upon. Then, as soon as the month of Vaiyasi began, there would be the weddings.

On the day Muttharasi got married, there were five weddings altogether. Usually the weddings were held during the morning puusai, and I was there at that particular time.

The drummers were sitting outside in front of the church. All the drummers were from our community. There usually were pipes and horns as well as drums, with cow's membrane stretched tightly across them. Inside the church hall, all five bridegrooms were getting ready in their wedding vettis, shirts, and gold-edged shoulder cloths. The place was full of young men. Beside the church, under a big tree, the five brides were being dressed and made up. All the women and children were gathered there. I went to watch the girls.

Usually, when they went to work in the fields, the women wore their saris with the pleats at the back. But the brides wore their pleats in front, like modern educated girls. Each of them had smoothed down and plaited

her hair, instead of pulling it back into a knot in the usual way. Everyone wore plenty of flowers tucked in at the back of the head. The brides powdered their faces and decorated their foreheads with *pottu*. After this, all the leftover strings of flowers were bitten off into small, small pieces and distributed to the little children who were related to the brides. Finally, each bride was given a big rose garland and an accompanying smaller jasmine garland. At last they were led in procession into the church.

The grooms were already inside the church, garlanded and seated on a mat each, in front of the altar railing, when the brides came in. A new mat had been placed there for each new couple, bride and groom, brought from the groom's house. As soon as all five couples were seated, the saamiyaar began the puusai.

We small children kept picking up the rose petals that fell from the brides' and grooms' garlands, and eating them, instead of following the service. At the moment of the tali-tying, each couple went up and knelt in front of the priest who blessed the tali and gave it to the groom to tie around his bride's neck. As the talis were tied, the musicians sitting outside broke into a loud beating of drums and blowing of pipes. It gave me a strange feeling when I heard this sudden sound.

As soon as the tali-tying was done, and they had received communion, the older women ran home to their housework. The men stayed until the end. As soon as the puusai was over, the drummers started up again. They went ahead, beating the drums all the time while the young men of the village followed, dancing to the rhythm. Behind them came the five bridegrooms accompanied by older men. They were followed by the five brides, and at last came the other women and us.

Even while we were setting off it got really hot. Relations of each bride and groom brought umbrellas to protect the couple from the sun. Friends and acquaintances went up to the bridegrooms and pinned two or five-rupee notes to their shirts. As soon as we reached the bazaar the procession stopped, the drummers set to with great verve, and the young men and small boys danced enthusiastically.

Friends and relations bought coffee or milk from the coffee shop

there for the brides and grooms, or soda, or sherbet. After they had drunk what they wanted, we came back to our streets with the music and the drums still playing. We then went in procession along all our streets. Relations of each couple called the bride and groom, and gave them the traditional welcome of milk and banana. They bought milk from the shops and added a couple of bananas to it.

After they had been through all the streets, and before each couple entered into the groom's house, people threw betel leaves into turmeric water and waved them around the pair. The bridegroom gave a coin to each one who did this. The families never failed to play the popular song, 'O bride and groom, enter, enter. Place your right foot first and come in, come in' as the newly-wedded pair came into the house. As soon as the song began, everyone knew the couple had come home. A mat was then spread out for them and they were asked to sit down.

On these occasions, the men usually sat on benches outside and chatted. Or they might stroll off together to the shops. But all the women were busy the entire time, cooking the rice and other things, and doing everything else. They served morning and afternoon meals to all the people in the house and to all the relations who had come from elsewhere to attend the wedding. After the bride and groom had eaten, they sat down together again.

The evening meal had to be served to everyone who gave a moi gift. A gift of five or ten rupees meant that an entire household had to be fed in return. And not only this, the guests also brought a box woven of fibre which they would fill with rice and take home. This was known as 'box-rice'. They usually took this rice home, covered it in water, and ate it the next day. Even while they were being served, they would scoop up some rice and set it aside. What else can people who struggle for their livelihood do?

People who were planning a wedding had to save what they could from the previous harvest, boil the paddy, mill it into rice, and put it away well ahead of time. They never could afford to buy the rice from the shops. So they boiled the paddy, had it milled, cleaned it and stored it away. On the wedding day the women did all the cooking themselves.

They never called in caterers or cooks as other communities did. They did what they could afford—boiled some rice, made a rasam, and sometimes even cooked a curry.

In the evening, as the drummers lead the procession, beating their drums, the bride and groom came to the well to draw water. All of us used to run there and watch. As soon as the bride and groom arrived, they were made to walk around the well, whose four corners were daubed with turmeric. The couple were asked to hold hands and drop a few betel leaves into the water. The number of leaves that fell face down indicated the number of girl children they would have; those that floated face up stood for the number of boys—that's what was said. After this, the groom lowered a bucket into the well and drew up some water which the bride poured into a water pot. She had to pour the water haphazardly, half into the pot and half outside. If she tried to pour it all carefully and directly into the pot, the people there told her to scatter it about more carelessly. This was a deliberate trick to keep the bridegroom at his task as long as possible. In the same way, later, the girl drew up water for the groom who also filled the pot as carelessly as he could. At last, when the pot was full, one way or another, the groom lifted it up and placed it on the girl's hip, and they returned home to the beating of drums.

I don't know why they do all this. I don't know whether perhaps it is supposed to be symbolic of a married life in which both would do all the jobs equally. When I asked my mother, she just said that whatever it was, it had always been the custom.

After the water was carried home, the bride and groom were bathed. This was called the anointing-with-oil ceremony. We children ran ahead from the well and stood about, all ready to watch. The bride and groom put away their wedding clothes, and came and sat down side by side, wearing their everyday sari and vetti. Then, the women from the family poured a little oil into the bride's cupped hand and asked her to rub it over the boy's head. She usually felt terribly shy, and did as she was told with her head bent low, never looking up. In the same way, they then poured some oil into the boy's hand and asked him to rub it all over

the girl's head. After this, they mixed some soap-nut powder with water and asked them to rub this too over each other, turn by turn. They then had to pour water over each other. All the people assembled there helped with all of this, giving the couple a good rub to their heads. Some of the relations, uncles, and nephews there, sometimes threw bran and chaff on the couple's heads, just in fun. When the bath was done, the two went inside, dried and tidied themselves, dressed themselves once more in their wedding clothes and came and sat outside.

It was then time for the elders of the village to come and exchange the couple's garlands. First of all the naattaamai exchanged the girl's garland for the groom's, and the groom's for the girl's, making a cross on each forehead. After this, all the elders and relations came and exchanged the garlands and blessed the bridal pair.

By three o'clock in the afternoon, all the women started the cooking, digging out big hearths, setting them alight, cooking great andas of rice, chopping vegetables; and they did it all themselves. They drained the rice by spreading it out on a cloth laid on straw and then left it to cool. Even though the andas were really huge, the women managed all the work themselves. All that the men had to do was to serve the guests when they sat down to eat.

Before they sat down to their meal, the guests who wished to make a moi gift, handed it to the groom who was seated right in front; then they went in. As each guest handed over his gift, a man would announce what it was, loudly, over the mike. This was how it was done at Muttharasi's wedding as well. If the bride's relations gave a gift, he called out, 'O relations gathered here at the wedding of Muttharasi daughter of Sakkarai, Chinnappan, son of Thomas gives five rupees as moi.' Then all the people shouted, 'Well done', and two women immediately raised an ululation. In the same way, if the groom's relations gave a moi, the announcement over the mike referred particularly to the groom. The whole village could hear the moi announcements. When I was a bit older, my friends and I used to keep a running total as each moi was announced.

When a wedding happened in the house of a guest who had given a moi gift, an equivalent moi had to be returned. Otherwise it became

a scandal. That's why my Paatti used to say, 'What is moi but a debt without interest?'

A number of women were chatting as they sat together on the thinnai of our house. Siluva Mary was saying, 'When we got married, although we might have seen each other before, and might even have been acquainted, it was our parents who decided on the match and arranged for us to become husband and wife. But these days, young men and women get to know each other at work and make up their own minds to live together. Disgraceful donkeys!'

My Paatti immediately added, 'When we were young girls, we never wandered about so freely. We submitted to the man whom our parents chose for us. As for me, the night your cousin tied the tali round my neck, I was frightened out of my wits.'

I butted in, 'Why were you so frightened, Paatti?'

'Why? Why wouldn't I be frightened when I was left alone at night with a man I didn't even know? I at least managed to cope somehow or the other. Your Perimma's was a sad case. She knew nothing when she got married, and it was a disaster for her.'

My mother told me, 'It seems, when they got my sister married, when her husband came near her on her wedding night, she ran away screaming, "Did you get me married just so that this man could do dirty things to me?" After that, she would come and sleep with my mother every night. However much the older women tried to counsel her, she wouldn't go to him. She kept on saying, "When I see that man I'm just terrified. He's a terrible fellow. I won't go with him." He, apparently, was patient for a while, but after four or five days, he came and dragged her away and forcibly slept with her.'

Paatti said, 'The young girls in those days didn't know anything.' She went on, 'Now, look, even the little tots know it all. That's why they say it's *Kali kaalam*.'

I said to my mother, 'How would they know anything in those days, Amma, when they were married off at ten and twelve? You yourself told

me once that they got the girls married even before they came of age. Now at least they know what to expect when they marry. And Paatti goes and calls it *Kali kaalam*.'

'What you say is fair enough. All the same, it's a fact that girls these days are too forward.'

I didn't ask her anything more after that. But all the same, I thought about the weddings that are held in our streets and the weddings that are held elsewhere.

In our streets, there is no snatching and grabbing in the name of dowry and such-like. People make do with what they have. Instead of the woman bringing a dowry at the time of marriage, in our case, the man gives a parisam, a bride-price. He gains respect according to the amount he is able to give.

But among the more educated, nowadays, all this is changing. These people, for some reason, want to copy the upper castes. It's becoming a real problem having to make so many jewels for the bride and giving a lump sum worth so much, on top of that.

Such people can change themselves into a different caste only in these superficial matters, though. Because, whatever we do, whatever rituals we copy from other castes they, for their part, always rate us as beneath them. So what is the point of trying to copy them? Why should we lose all the better customs that are ours, and end up as neither one thing nor the other? It's like forgetting the butter in one's hands and going in search of ghee.

If we hold a wedding in our usual way, it seems beggarly to others. Or it seems uncouth. 'These people don't know how to save the rest of the meal, once their stomachs are full,' they say. 'That's why they never make any progress.' Perhaps they want us to be envious of other people's wealth, and betray our neighbours in order to gain it.

In our streets, even when there's a death, it is the women who will go and sit by the corpse and sing dirges. The men remain outside. If a woman dies, the other women get together, bathe and prepare the body, and lift it on to the bier. When the burial takes place, everyone will go to the graveyard, both men and women. When the burial is over, people will

go home and bathe. There aren't rules saying this must only be done by women, and this by the men. Everyone does everything.

When the women have their babies, they deliver them at home and return to work in the fields in five or six days. After my Paatti died, another woman acted as midwife and attended at childbirth. There are no other conveniences nor special arrangements for pregnant women.

Nowadays, they have all sorts of rules for pregnant women: what they must and must not do. They must keep to such and such diet, and take such and such medicines. But our women eat their usual kanji, go to work as always, and return to the fields five or six days after the delivery. It is only in this way that their families can eat.

In fact, many women have died because they have their babies at home, without proper care. But they don't have the means to pay for hospital care. And neither nurses nor doctors will come into our streets as willingly as they go to others.

If a man dies, there is no rule that says his wife must immediately go into white saris nor that she must behave in such and such manner. She will carry on in her usual way. And this is because, even when her husband is alive, it isn't compulsory that a woman must wear a pottu on her forehead, nor bangles and other jewellery about her person, nor smear herself with turmeric. Where does she have the jewellery in the first place? And where does she have the time to smear herself with turmeric, have a bath, and dress herself up with pottu and flowers? She runs to work at dawn and comes home after sunset. So whether her husband is alive or dead, she will follow the same routine. She might, perhaps, remove her tali. On the other hand, some women never wear a tali, though they marry and live with their husbands. Talis are not that important among us.

Some women marry a second time after the death of a husband. That is quite normal among us. On the other hand, among the other communities of our village, you can see straight away, the indignities suffered by widows. In our street though, everyone is held the same; widows are not treated differently.

CHAPTER nine

I was walking home from the bus stand one day, when Pecchiamma stopped me. 'Ei, tha, you haven't got married yet, I hear. You're old enough, aren't you?'

Pecchiamma and I had studied together up to the fifth class. She dropped out, just as we had reached the sixth. She was a girl from the *chakkili* community. The girls from that community don't go in for schooling all that much. A few of the boys might study a bit.

'No, tha, I'm not married. But who's this? Is she your daughter?' I pointed to the child at her hip.

'Yes, she was born after my second marriage. I have two children from my first, a boy and a girl. The boy, Kali, stays with his father. The girl, Ramaayi, stays with me.'

What is she talking about, I asked myself. Amongst us Christians, a woman can marry again only after her first husband dies. But not only had this woman married a second time while her first husband was alive, she had even had a child. Still, I didn't want to go into all that just then, standing there in the middle of he street, so I said, 'Right, Pecchi, I must go, it's getting late. We'll meet another time.'

After I had reached home, I thought to myself that I should ask someone about Pecchi. Sure enough, two days later, a woman from the chakkili community, Irulaayi, came to our house. Irulaayi worked in the fields of a landlord and had saved a couple of sacks of cholam which she stored in our house. Irulaayi's own house was a tiny one. Her husband was a drunkard. If she kept the cholam at home, he would sell it and

drink it all away. Our Paatti and Irulaayi's mother, Maari, had known each other for a long time. It seems they had a long-standing borrowing and lending arrangement with each other. That's how we came to know Irulaayi.

It struck me that I should ask Irulaayi about Pecchiamma. I went up to her as she was talking to my mother. I said, 'Has that Pecchi from your street really got married a second time? How come?'

'Who? You mean Karuppasaami's daughter, Pecchi, don't you? She finished with her first fellow, and then married Sudalaimaadan's son, the one from the last street in the east side. Now she's given him a child as well.' Irulaayi spoke as if it were a perfectly normal thing to do.

'How can she marry a second time when her first husband is still alive?'

'O, it's quite common with us. It's only you Bible-people who can't do it. We are Hindus. But even amongst us, it's only the *pallar* and chakkili communities who can end one marriage and go and marry a second time. None of the other communities do it.'

'So tell me, how did this Pecchi end her marriage?'

'She was given away in marriage in the usual way, and she even had two children. The husband was always drunk. He couldn't give her so much as a paisa for the household expenses. On top of that, he beat her up and snatched away all that she earned. How long was she to starve? Even if she were to put up with it, what about her little children? Worse still, the ugly fellow also had another woman. Not one of Pecchi's things was safe in her own house. On top of all this, he pretty nearly killed her with his blows. The girl put up with it as long as she could, and at last went back to her father's house.'

'So did she just stay there, and then get married again?'

'What she did was to ask her father to tell the naattaamai all that had happened, to say she couldn't live with her husband anymore, and to arrange for a separation. The naattaamai called a meeting of the panchayat, and asked the husband and wife to come to it. And so they ended the marriage.'

'How exactly do they do it?' I asked.

'Why, in the usual way. The naattaamai asked Pecchi what the matter was. She told him how she suffered. She said how he listened only to his mistress, and tormented his wife and children, how he got drunk and behaved like a brute. She said she didn't want to live with him anymore. So they agreed, and formally ended the marriage by deciding that the boy should stay with his father, and the girl with her mother.'

'So after that she was allowed to marry again, was she?'

'Yes, as you know Pecchi married again, and has another child as well. He hasn't married again, though. He's still going around with his mistress. And that boy, Kali, spends most of the time in Pecchi's house. Well, I'm off. It's getting dark.' Irulaayi left soon after that.

When I thought about all that she had told me, I was quite shocked. But it seemed to me that it was a very good thing that some of our women had the option of ending their marriages. Because it meant a woman need not spend her entire life, burning and dying, with a man she dislikes, just because of this thing called marriage. But I also felt sad that Christian women didn't have this chance.

On the other hand, many upper-caste women could not even think of it in their wildest dreams. If a woman leaves her husband and chooses to live apart from him, people will keep on tormenting her and even drive her to her death. She has to accept that even if he is only a stone or a blade of grass, he is still her husband.

I asked my mother, 'Well, 'Ma, if Irulaayi's story is to be believed, then a man also can decide to end a marriage if he can't stand his wife, I suppose?'

'If even a woman has this chance, why shouldn't a man have it? You just go and see what is happening in their streets. Lots of men finish off their marriages as fast as they can and start new ones. If you ask their women, they'll say that the Bible-folk are definitely better off.'

'Why do they say that? It looks as if they don't realize how lucky they are. Tell them they should look around them. In every other community, a tali round the neck is the end of the story. A woman is told she must

stay with her husband until she dies and put up with every kind of torture. She can't go back to her parents' house. But she is not able to keep on suffering abuse in the house she has entered, either. Do you know how many women have committed suicide because they have no other go? And do you know how many women who go on living like corpses, have actually been killed and their deaths passed off as suicide? Now, if they had a chance like this, they could leave those brutes and marry again if they wished to. Or live on their own.'

'That's what you say. But you go and see what's happening in our village among the pallar and chakkiliyar. More than half the time, it's the man who cuts off his wife without a thought and marries another. So, all this is actually more damaging to the women.'

On reflection, I had to agree. But I said, 'It's because he doesn't like her that he ends the marriage, though. If a man doesn't like you, how can you keep him tied up? What is the point of holding on to him? You've got to accept that the wretched fellow is hell-bent on leaving you, and let him go. In our communities we don't abuse women who live apart from their husbands. And we do allow second marriages. So what's the problem?'

'You're right. They say that when a man dislikes his wife, if her hand touches him it's a sin, if her foot touches him it's a sin. So, if a husband nags and finds fault all the time with whatever you do or try, it makes no difference whether you live with him or leave him. But in our Christian religion, you can't leave a husband and go off on your own that easily. Haven't you heard the words the priest speaks at the time of the tali-tying?' My mother had started on a sermon, I could see.

'Why, what does the priest say?'

'He says, "What God has put together, let no man put asunder." We make a solemn promise, don't we, that we will stay with the man we marry, "in sickness and in health, for better for worse, for richer for poorer". The nuns say that the promise we make to the priest is as good as the promise we make to God. He blesses the tali saying no law nor panchayat nor courts of justice can separate a wedded couple. Whatever it is, we have to live our lives according to the promise we made to God, in front of four, five people.'

'Go on, Ma. It's by calling on all this stuff about God, the promises made to him, our sins and our good deeds, and Heaven and everlasting Hell, that the priests and nuns frighten the life out of us. But God created us so that we can be happy and free. I am sure that God doesn't want us to be living like slaves to the day we die, without any rights or status, just because of a cord around the neck. Don't you agree?'

'So, are you saying that had we stayed as Hindus, we'd have no problems now? That our lives would be happy and comfortable?'

'No, I'm not saying that. Being a Hindu has its own gains and losses, of course. But the advantage is that you can get rid of a man you can't stand.' After this neither of us said anything for a while.

At this point, an aunt, Occchakkannu Chinnamma, came to our house and sat down with us, saying, 'What's the matter? Mother and daughter in complete silence, then? Where's Maama gone? Off to the fields?'

My mother explained, 'Irulaayi of the chakkili community came visiting. There's a woman called Pecchi who lives in their parts. She studied with my daughter. That Pecchi has finished with her first husband, married again, and even has another child. We were talking about that. You see, in our faith, we can't do that.'

'Quite true, Akka. In the upper castes, too, a woman can't lead a life on her own if she has left her husband. On all sides, they'll call her an abandoned wife and her life will be finished. It doesn't matter whether she comes from a wealthy family, whether she is beautiful, whether she is educated or ignorant; the day she leaves her husband, she loses everything. She won't be given any respect or value. Even if the men leave her alone, the women devils will keep on calling her names until her spirit is broken and her life is gone. I've seen this when I go to work in our landlords' houses.'

'What did that Pottalu Mandai Ayya lack in land or wealth? There's an only daughter. He wrote off forty or fifty acres of wet and dry land in her name, and got her married. Within four months, it seems, the husband had it all made over in his name and refused even to look at the girl. He makes no secret of the fact that he keeps his athai's daughter as his woman, and torments this girl. She stood it as long as she could, and finally came away to her father's house. That ayya broke down in grief

because his daughter had separated from her husband, and had to go home to her parents, an abandoned wife. He died the very next month. That poor amma is now a widow, and is dying herself, with her abandoned daughter on her hands, besides. How that family lived at one time! And now, look at them!'

My mother summed it up briefly, 'If you marry a pey, what can you do except to climb the tamarind tree where the pey lives?'

I felt a stinging rage when she said this, and lashed out, 'Oh yes, a man can be a pey. He can be a fire-spitting pisaasu. But a woman must still look after his needs, protect and support him, change herself because of his pey-nature, and keep him happy always. For how long must she degrade herself and go about carrying him by his arse? If she doesn't get out the moment she realizes he's not a man but a pey and make a life for herself, then of course she might as well climb that tamarind tree.'

'Ei, yemma! Look how furious your daughter gets, and she isn't even married! But that's the reason why she's jumping up and down. Let her find herself in a man's grasp and that will be the end of it. He'll have her well trained within four days.' Chinnamma laughed.

I didn't reply. She went on, 'Just look at it, tha. Among the pallar and the chakkiliyaar, a marriage can be ended and the couple can go and marry others. Among the paraiyar there's a different way of settling it. Say a girl can't stand her husband, and comes away, leaving him. Do you think our community will leave her alone? There's no way she can live by herself, go to work, and earn her livelihood. They'll call a panchayat meeting, hold a trial, and force the girl to go back. And who do they call to the trial? They never even summon the girl. They call her father or her brother and finish it off by ordering him, "Give the girl a couple of slaps and tell her she must go and live with her husband." And these are our village elders!'

I asked, 'But why must she do what they ask? Why can't she ignore what they say, and stay where she chooses?'

'Some women dare to do just that. But you know what happens, then, don't you? The husband will turn up in person, beat her as if she's an animal, and drag her home by the hair. East Street Aandakanni's

daughter had just been to bathe in the well, and was walking home with four or five of her friends when her husband swooped down on her like a thieving kite swooping down on a chicken and carried her away. It seems he took her home, threw her down, and stamped hard all over her. Of course, if they find it impossible to live together, by rights he should let her go. But he's a terrible man. It seems he locked her up for two whole days and wouldn't let her go out anywhere, even to shit. Wicked fellow.' Chinnamma then borrowed our spade and went away.

My mother commented, 'If you look at it like that, it seems that it was a mistake that we ever became Christians. My Thaatha and Paatti were both Hindus. It was my mother who went and changed her name from Vellaiyamma to Mariamma and converted to Christianity.'

I said with a sigh, 'Had we stayed as Hindus, our women would have had the chance of divorce at least. But in everything else, we're all in the same position.' And Amma and I began to play a dice-game.

CHAPTER ten

I remember when it was time for the elections and I was in the seventh or eighth class. I felt very happy because they gave us a holiday. Because it was at our school that the voting happened. When I was small, I went to the voting booth with my mother. I stood in the queue with her. When Amma went to cast her vote I waited outside, looking around and watching the fun. Several policemen were standing about. The women stood in one line and the men in another.

When we came home after she had voted, I asked my mother, 'Well, Amma, who did you vote for?'

My mother answered, 'You shouldn't tell anyone how you voted. But I'll tell you this: I voted as your Ayya told me to.'

When I asked my Paatti she said, 'Ei, di, they give you a sheet and tell you to put a rubber stamp on one of the pictures there. As for me, I went and stamped all the pictures there like a blind old bat. As soon as I came out, the teacher's wife told me that my vote won't be valid.' Paatti laughed.

'But you could have asked and found out how to do it before you went to the voting booth,' I told her.

'O yes, as if my vote alone is going to make such a difference! How does it actually matter, whether we even vote or not? Who's going to change the writing on our foreheads? All that happens is that we lose a day's work because of this voting business.'

As she was telling me this, my uncle's wife Anthoni came by. At once Paatti asked her, 'Ei di, Anthoni, did you look at your voting paper and stamp it properly? What picture did you stamp?'

'Who, me? I stamped the picture of the man ploughing. See, it's only because of the plough and bullock that our stomachs are going to be filled. Without them our lives are nothing but dust. That's why I chose that picture.'

Paatti commented, 'Anyway you stamped just one picture. God alone knows how many people did it my way and stamped four or five pictures.'

'Ei, you wretches, what a business it was to get into the school and cast one's vote! Here's one fellow asking you to vote for the Rising Sun. There's another telling you to give it to the Double Leaf. Even the communists are there shamelessly asking you to vote for the Sickle. Whatever you do, you shouldn't vote for the communists. Never, ever.' Anandamma finished speaking and threw a handful of boiled gram into her mouth.

Anthoni asked her, 'And why shouldn't we vote for the communists?'

'Why? Because those fellows say there is no God. We say we believe in the one and only true God, don't we? So won't it be a sin if we vote for them? No, we should never vote for them.'

At this point, a young fellow, Kannan, who was sitting there listening to all this, butted in. 'It must be true that women are ignorant sluts. Who ever said that there is no God? That's all nonsense. What communists say is that people shouldn't go around calling God, God, and at the same time exploiting and oppressing the working classes and labourers. You are just talking big.'

'Whatever it is, what do we know about it? Whether it is Rama who rules, or Ravana, what does it matter? Our situation is always the same. I wouldn't have even gone to cast my vote. It was only because of that macchaan Malayandi that I went in the first place. He gave me a couple of rupees and told me to put a stamp on some picture or the other. I stood in the queue and went in, but completely forgot which picture he told me to stamp. So then I decided on my own to put one stamp on the cycle picture and one on the elephant picture. Then I bought myself some *mocchai payiru* with the two rupees he gave me.' Anandamma gave Paatti a small handful of the gram.

Paatti took the gram and ate them, squashing each one first. 'Your

vote won't be valid either, di. You've gone and stamped two pictures, haven't you? You must choose only one.'

'I'm a bit better than you, old woman. After all, I stamped only two pictures. You went and stamped the whole lot. Mine has to be a bit better than yours. It will be valid a little bit at least.'

All the men who were sitting there laughed when they heard this. Kannan remarked, 'These are completely ignorant donkeys. They should never have been allowed to vote, Appa.'

Kannan had smallpox when he was young, and one eye had been affected. He had become blind in that eye. It had gone completely white. Everyone called him Kannan because of his odd eye.

Palicchi heard what he said and retorted sharply, 'So what do we lose if we don't vote? Whether we vote or not, those who drink kanji continue to drink kanji and those who eat rice continue to eat rice. People talk as if it is only by voting that we fill our stomachs.'

I couldn't help but agree with her.

Just then four or five girls came towards us, giggling together. Palicchi teased them, 'Ei, wretches, why are you in such a fit of giggles? Did you see some good-looking fellow at the voting booth or what?'

They stopped laughing instantly and Savaripillai answered sharply, 'Ei, I suppose all of you went to the voting booth just to gawk at the men. What a question she asks, as soon as she claps eyes on us!'

Anandamma said, 'All right, all right, leave it alone. She was only teasing you, and you're getting all serious. Anyway, why were you laughing? Share the joke with us, di.'

'See sister-in-law, you know that old woman Ucchaayi who lives in the South Street? She was quietly shitting away by herself, when two young men carried her off bodily, told the old lady to cast her vote, carried her right back after that and flung her into her house. She, poor thing, can't see in any case, so how would she have voted? We were laughing about that.' When Seyamary explained, everyone there burst into laughter.

'In any case, the old lady got a free ride. But did they give her any paisa or anything?' Anandamma asked.

'Who gave her any paisa? The instant she came out of the booth they carried her back and threw her into her house and pushed off,' Rani told us.

Paatti was listening to all this and intervened at this point. 'Do you people know the story of our Sammuga Kizhavi and her vote? At the last elections, people brought their cars from house to house and drove us to the voting booths, got us to vote, and then left us there. Most of the landlords belonged to the Congress Party at that time. Sammuga Kizhavi climbed into that Govalsaami Ayya's car and rode off in great style. As soon as she finished voting, she went and sat in the car, insisting they should drive her back, or else.'

'So did they take her back, Paatti?' Seyamary asked.

'As if that man would do that! He spoke to her sharply and ordered her to get out. But she sat there defiantly and said, "You made sure of my vote, and now you're going to leave me stranded here, are you? We get no good out of voting for you, so at least let me have a free ride. Just give me a ride home, Ayya. Otherwise I'll speak to all the people in our street and none of the women will vote for your party." And she simply refused to get out of the car. They realized there was no way out, and so they drove her back here. And do you know what she said to us as soon as she got here? "Which of you in this street has had a ride in Govalsaami Ayya's car, right along the bazaar and back?" And she laughed out aloud.'

Anthoni remarked, 'This Sammuga Kizhavi is a shameless old thing, though. She can't ever keep out of mischief.'

Paatti continued, 'Sometime after that, Sammuga Kizhavi came by when I was relieving myself in the grazing grounds. She told me, "All that Govalsaami did was to give me a free ride. I didn't vote for any of them, I just folded up the paper just as it was and shoved it into the box. He wasn't watching me, after all."' We all burst out laughing, yet again.

As we were chatting together in our house, four or five young men came round. 'Have you voted yet?' they asked us. They went on, 'You must give your vote to the Puratchi Talaivar, Leader of the Revolution. Remember that it is he who gives our children free and healthy meals!'

As soon as they had gone, Paatti had her say. 'Go away, stupid boys. Does he bring these healthy meals from his own house to feed our children? It's all government money. He can scoop it up and fling it about as he chooses. They talk as if we know nothing.'

Anandamma said, 'The boys in our streets are going about like rabid dogs, supporting this party and that party. Why are they getting so involved instead of minding their own business and earning a proper living? Let the rich men look after themselves. If we lose even one day's work, our arses have to dry up. Instead of thinking about that, these boys go in for all this party-politics. Ignorant fellows, let them get lost!'

'In any case, everything these parties say is just eyewash,' Palicchi added. 'All it means is that the boys of our community get into fist-fights and battles with each other. Do you remember when one of our boys ended up murdering another four or five years ago—and that too, right in the bazaar—and it was all in the name of party-politics.'

'True, Athai,' agreed Savaripillai as she rose to go. 'That poor boy, Selvarasu! They butchered him. And what did his party ever do for him? These rich men use us as dice in their own games. Yet this simple fact doesn't seem to enter the thick skulls of our boys.'

After this the women went away, one by one. Paatti, my mother, and I were left sitting together. After a while, Paatti said, 'Nowadays even the landlords have changed their style. They used to belong to all sorts of different parties. Now, it seems one of them, a Naidu, that is, has started a new party, and they've all joined him.'

'So it isn't the party that's important; it is caste that comes first. Isn't that true, Paatti?'

'That's how it seems to work out, in practice. But our boys don't realize it and so they fight amongst themselves because of different party loyalties.'

However much we strain to leap forward, caste holds us down like a tap root. It is at the centre of religion, politics, education, and every other wretched thing. In our streets, most importantly, women never have anything to do with this stinking party-politics. They don't care who comes and who goes. They know they have to look after their stomachs

themselves. Given our condition, that's all we can do. It's the wealthy who stir up all the trouble for us.

Our women never know a thing about who's in power, what they do, and why they do it; why we should vote and who we should vote for. Why, even the men don't understand any of all this. They assume that it is enough for people who call themselves communists to wear a red cloth across their shoulders. Or for those who belong to the DMK to wear vettis with red and black borders. Or for the Congressmen to carry *khaddar* shoulder-cloths. If they attend a party meeting, run some trivial errand and earn a couple of paisa, or if they are given a drink by a party worker, they act as if they have become ministers.

The women are in a worse position. More than half never go and vote. Given how many women there are altogether, there is so much we could achieve. We could demand the rights that are due to us. We could fling away the beggarly coins the party workers bother to give us when they ask us to vote for them, and elect an MLA from our own community. We could demonstrate our own strength through political power. Instead of all that...I can't help thinking about all this.

Now, in recent years, there is the whiff of Ambedkar-talk blowing right through our streets. Bhakkiyam complained one day, 'Our boys are going around everywhere talking about Ambedkar. But it really only causes trouble for us. When we tried to go to work, the landlord wouldn't let us work for him, but drove us away, saying, "You people had better go and make a living by working on your great Ambedkar's fields. Why come here?" '

'How does it hurt them if we mention Ambedkar,' my mother wanted to know.

'But Ambedkar was one of us, wasn't he? He struggled for the sake of our community, didn't he? Well, tha? That's what these boys say; is it true?' Bhakkiyam turned towards me and asked.

'Yes, and if we act as he told us to, then these other people will realize how strong we can be. But they will never let us unite. They separate us

in the name of party, God, priest, and caste; they play games with us. And we are like grinning puppets in their hands.' I spoke angrily.

My mother said, 'But what can we poor women do? Even our menfolk are helpless, after all.'

'Please don't say that, Amma. It is by repeating that to us that they have made us as useless as rotten eggs. Nowadays women can take up all sorts of responsibilities. But just as they fooled us and took away our rights within our homes, they have also marginalized us in the world outside. But now, generation by generation we must start thinking for ourselves, taking decisions, and daring to act. Don't we sharpen and renew a rusted sickle? Just like that, we must sharpen our minds and learn to live with self-respect.'

'When it's such a battle even for our daily kanji, how can we do all this? Our greatest struggle is to fill our bellies,' Bhakkiyam said.

'Why do we alone have to struggle so much for a mouthful of kanji? Just think about that. Why is it that people who don't do a stroke of work can fill their bellies so easily, while for us life is always a "lottery"? Just think about it and you'll know.'

'What you are asking me is fair enough, tha. We've believed what they told us repeatedly—that we are useless chickens, scratching about in the rubbish—and now we have no confidence in ourselves. At least from now on we should stand up for ourselves. Well, I must go. My son told me to buy a newspaper. Every day he reads out news items to anyone who wants to come and listen. I'll see you soon, won't I?' And Bhakkiyam rose to her feet to go.

CHAPTER eleven

In our streets, there are any number of restrictions for women. For instance, even today, only men are allowed to go to the cinema. Never women. There isn't a cinema hall in our town, in fact. There's one only in our neighbouring town two or three miles away. They walk all the way there to see a film and then come walking back. Now, they say, there are a couple of buses that go there.

When I asked Paatti why women shouldn't go to the cinema, she said, 'All sorts of fellows from all different castes go to the cinema. If any of those others grab one of our women or assault her then it will lead to a fight, won't it? That's why.'

'But women from other castes go. Why don't they make a pass at them, Paatti?'

'They never dare touch the women from other castes. But they don't have any respect for our women. And our men are afraid that if anything indecent happens to one of us, it might end in a riot. Look how old I am. I have no idea what a film looks like.'

I persisted, 'But Paatti how can someone be so indecent and rude to just one of us? After all, there will be other women about, won't there?'

'I've told you already, tha, haven't I? They are afraid to touch other women. Because they have caste-power, money, everything. And what do we have? Even if a fellow assaults one of us, it's difficult to stand up to him or make an enemy of him. Because in the end, we have to go to him for employment. How long can we keep up the fight?' Paatti stood up to go.

Again I asked, 'Well, if upper-caste men lay their hand on one of us, we might have to turn a blind eye out of fear, and let it go. But if palla boys so much as touch paraiya girls or tease them, there always is a terrible fight. Why are they prepared to fight then?'

'I can't sit here answering all your silly questions. Don't I have to go to work?' and Paatti walked off.

To my certain knowledge, a paraiya boy was accused of sexually assaulting a palla girl; he was brought before the panchayat and fined. Just like that, an argument arose because a palla was harassing a paraiya girl; he too was fined. I thought to myself that we show all this pride and honour amongst ourselves, but we never show any of this outside our communities.

Now when I reflect on all this, I realize that when it comes to inter-caste marriages, our people are not bothered if boys make a marriage outside their caste. But if a girl marries out of caste no one will accept it. They'll make a big quarrel out of it.

In our streets, once, a girl went and fell in love with a palla boy, not quite realizing what would happen. Both the girl and the boy really liked each other. But, you should have seen the torment they put her through! It was enough to make one feel that not even in one's wildest dreams should one think of men from different castes. So much they made her suffer.

That girl was beaten up in her house every day by her father and her brother. And they weren't light slaps that she was given, either. For all this, mind you, she was an educated girl who worked for her living.

The younger brother hit her on the ear so severely that her earring was smashed to smithereens. Another time he pulled her so hard by the chain she wore around her neck that it came apart in pieces that he threw away like bits of string. You might say even this wasn't too bad. But the ear on which he rained blows swelled up on all sides and was bruised black and blue. Poor thing, it was her mother who put various poultices on it, gave her fomentations, and finally managed to heal her.

Sometime later I went to visit her, and found her in a terrible state, her hair all unkempt, unable even to cry.

'What's the matter, tha,' I asked.

It was her mother who answered, in floods of tears. 'This girl was coming home from the school where she works, to drink her mid-day kanji. That boy, her brother, caught her by the hair even before she could come into the house, and dragged her in right from the street. He kept on lifting her by the hair and smashing her down against the floor. Her forehead was broken and bruised, and blood poured over her face. While she was cowering, unable to bear the pain, he pulled her by the hair so roughly that it came off in bunches. He kicked her in the ribs again and again until she couldn't even breathe. Her father came rushing up when he saw what was going on. I thought he must surely be coming to pull the boy away. Instead, he brought a piece of firewood and aimed four blows at her. I'm only a woman. I couldn't stop them. The boy even locked the front door and then went for her. I thought he had gone completely crazy. He'd rush away, then come back and kick her in the ribs. He'd rush away again, then come back and shout abuse at her. He even stamped on her face. God knows what will happen to any girl he marries.'

When I heard all this, I was shocked, and could only stand there, completely stunned. I just didn't know what to say. When I asked her whether I should speak to him, she pleaded, 'Ayyayyo, please don't do that, Akka. If you speak to him, he won't spare my life after you've gone.' She clung to me and wept. The tears streamed down her face.

'Whatever did she do on her way back from school for him to beat her almost to death?' I asked her mother.

'There's that palla boy, don't you know, the one she's friendly with? It seems his sister-in-law or someone called out to her and was talking to her. It's all because of that.'

I was outraged that for such a trivial thing he had almost killed her. I asked then, 'What if you went to the police station just as you are with all your bruises, and made a complaint?'

'Ayyayyo, don't ask me. Please don't do anything,' she said, begging me piteously with folded hands. She was trembling with fear.

I thought to myself that somehow or other this girl must marry

that boy, and so I advised her, 'Rather than be beaten to death like this, it would be better for you to get married quietly.' She didn't answer me; she just wept silently. I went home.

In the middle of all this, some of the men from our street went to the boy's father and told him all sorts of stories, exaggerating wildly. Not only that, they also went to this girl's brother and her father and told them a pack of lies involving her. The more they heard this, the more blows they rained on her and abused her.

I told her the only way to stop all this would be to get married as quickly as possible. She replied, 'I've only just started working. If I have a register wedding, they'll definitely sack me from my job. In any case, I can't be married in the church in our village. Our paraiya boys will never stand for it. And I can't be married from his house either. They say that if I want to be married in a church in a different parish, I will need written permission from our own parish priest.' She looked totally dejected.

What she said was absolutely true. Because she was teaching in a school run by Christian priests, if she behaved in a way that was not to their liking, they would sack her on some trumped up charge. I gave what advice I could, 'You go to your parish priest, tha, explain everything to him in detail, and get him to write you a letter.'

Soon after this, the girl did just that. She went to the priest, told him everything, and asked for his help. It was then that we came to realize what a treacherous character that priest was.

Although the line that the church takes is that inter-caste marriages are a good thing, these priests themselves are always blocking them. As for that parish priest, he listened to the girl's story and then went and broadcasted it to all and sundry, humiliating her and holding her up to ridicule. He spoke about her as if she had been behaving like a whore, cast suspicion on her morals, met her in a room all alone and leered at her, made false promises to her, and kept her running between the church and her home like a dog; but he never organized a wedding or anything for her.

She begged and pleaded with the next parish priest who succeeded

him, and managed at last to get a letter of permission. With the help of some close friends, she and the boy went to another village and got married. Within a few days the men on our street had found out all about it and were up in arms. Now she's found work elsewhere. She can't even set foot in her own village. Both families are still hostile towards them. Poor things, they can't be seen together here, and have to lead secret lives.

Think about it: what is it this girl has done that is supposed to be so wrong? In our streets there are men who have married girls from other castes and other villages and who live together happily. People who can accept such marriages get really angry and upset when it is the girl who marries a man of a different caste. If the men do it, it's fine. But if a girl does it, it's terrible. I don't see how this can be just.

They say that if a man marries outside his caste, it is nothing. But if a girl marries outside her caste, the honour and pride of the whole community is lost. I really can't understand how honour can be lost in such a way.

In the same way, they can't stand it if a girl studies a little, writes a little, or dares to speak up in public places. The men say, 'Whatever it is, she is only a woman.' Whatever she does or achieves, they give it no credit, rate it as low, the only reason being that she was born a woman. It is the same in every field. At the most, if a woman achieves something especially good, they will say, 'Look at her, Appa, she is like a man.' Even in this, they are only praising themselves.

Because they are male, and for this reason alone, men can marry the girls they choose. They can even marry out of caste. In the case of a woman, she can marry anyone within the caste, but she must not marry into another caste. So it's only the girls with little or no education, and who go to work in the fields, who will choose to marry boys of their own community and caste. If they cannot get married in the proper way, they will live together anyway. But a girl who has a little education and has progressed somewhat, is not allowed to seek a like-minded man, and certainly not marry anyone of her choice. If she leaves the caste community

and marries outside, there might even be a caste riot. So the couple have no other hope but to go somewhere else, to another town, and to be married secretly.

They will abuse the girl, saying, 'Ei, are there no men left in our streets then, that you must go looking for a fellow in another caste?' A girl may go around with ten men of her own caste, but she must not seek a single man outside it.

Why is there this rule that she must marry only within the caste? They'll never let a girl choose a man after her own heart and live happily with him. It is what men say that has become the rule of law. It is their happiness that comes first. Whatever happens must be according to their pleasure and their convenience. If anything is ever arranged for a woman's convenience, they will never stand for it. They will leap between heaven and earth to prevent it. They will insist you must not cross the line they have drawn. And what have we ever gained by never crossing that line all this time?

CHAPTER twelve

The rain was pissing down as if an elephant was up there in the sky. Five or six of us were sheltering in Thopulaan's cattle shed, chatting among ourselves.

'This rain is excellent for the sesame and cotton crops. They'll grow good and sturdy, with stalks as juicy as spinach,' Susaiamma remarked.

She spoke with such concern about the sesame and cotton plants, as if she were talking about her own children, that Solayamma asked her, 'Have you bought some land for yourself or what, tha?'

'How will I own land? I'm talking about the landlords' fields. It's only if their crops grow well and flourish that we are likely to get any work. Are you suggesting that there will be a time when our people will live off their own land? That's never going to happen.'

'Why do you say that? And why is owning land such a big thing? Here we are, spending all our days earning just enough to fill our bellies. Look at the upper classes though. What good does their wealth do them? Those women submit to their men all the time and are as shut in and controlled, like snakes locked up in boxes.'

'One way or another, it's all the same. We suffer in one way, they suffer in another.'

'But when you see them, do they look as if they suffer? They stay in the shade all day and all they do is cook and eat. They dress themselves in all the new fashions. They bathe and make themselves up every day. So what do they lack?'

Nagamma Kizhavi's house was just opposite the cattle shed. Nagamma

sat in her thinnai, winnowing rice. She said to us, 'How can you compare a mountain and a deep pit? We donkeys belong to rubbish heaps and can hope for no better fate until our dying day.'

But Marypillai rebuked her. 'Don't put us down completely like that! Our times are very different from yours. And anyway, what about all the checks and rules those women face? When I see all that, I often think to myself that I'm actually lucky to be born into the paraiya community.'

I asked her, 'So what are these checks and rules that they face?'

'Well might you ask. You just go and work for those ladies for a couple of years, then you'll know. When I was picking up the cow dung in that ayya Seyakumar's courtyard and working in his fields, I began to understand about their rules and regulations.'

Mary paused to remark that it didn't look as if the rain was going to stop just yet, and then went on. 'It's only on the surface that they look so good, really. It isn't that easy for them to get their daughters settled. They have to cover the girls' necks with jewellery, give them cash in their hands, and write off property and land in their names. Even after all this do you think the girls are happy in their new homes? Their in-laws keep on complaining that this and that is not enough, and they torment the girls. Good bridegrooms are as rare as horses' horns.'

Nagamma Kizhavi had to agree. 'True enough, tha. It's certainly not like that in our streets. We give the girls what we can afford—earrings and nose rings—and leave it at that. The groom's family will see to all the wedding expenses. We don't have to give any money. It's the groom who gives a cash gift and takes her away and marries her.'

'And not only that, Paatti. Say they borrow right and left, lose out here and there and get a girl married. Say the bridegroom dies soon after all that. The girl's life is finished, then. She can't wear flowers, nor use kunkumam and turmeric ever again. She can't wear jewels, she can't even wear coloured saris. They'll call her a widow and keep her away from all good occasions. That ayya Kuppusami Nayakkar's daughter became a widow just two years after she married, and now she has to suffer like this, poor thing. It seems they don't even give her enough

kanji to fill her belly properly. Does that happen among us? We don't even use the word "widow". We are all the same, and live alike.'

'Besides, in our streets, how many women marry again after their husbands die? That's the custom in our community. Even this Nagamma Paatti married a second time. Isn't that so, Paatti?'

'Yes, tha. We say there's nothing wrong in that. It's the upper castes who find it ugly.' Nagamma rose and went inside to cook her rice.

'Ei, come on di, it's stopped raining. Let's go home.' All of us sitting there started to run off.

I continued to reflect on this conversation even after I reached home. I could see that in some ways I was lucky to be a paraichi. On the other hand, I could not help remembering the number of times I was sorry and ashamed that I was born into this community.

Although there are many good things about us, we tend to forget it all and believe that to be upper caste is best. The grass is always greener on the other side, isn't it?

The way we wear our saris with the pleats at the back and the way we pull our hair back and knot it to one side—all these have their own beauty. But because others have called these uncouth, we have believed that and have wanted to copy upper-caste ways and customs.

While I was thinking about all this, our next-door neighbour came in with a box and a winnowing tray.

'Well, Chinnuma,' I greeted her, 'What brings you here at this hour with your box and your winnowing tray?'

'I have some ragi here, tha. I was thinking of grinding it and cooking some kali. In this rainy weather it feels really good to eat a hot kali along with a salt-fish kuzhambu. Where do you keep your grindstone? I want to grind all this. My daughter will be home soon.'

She spread out a piece of sacking, lifted the grindstone onto it and began to work. Her daughter, Devi, came in while she was grinding away busily.

'Amma, why can't you buy some rice at least for our evening meal? At mid-day we have ragi-kuuzh, in the evening it is ragi kali. I'm thoroughly fed up,' she said, as she sat down and began to help with the grinding.

'You don't know how much nourishment there is in ragi. You go and take a look in Parmasiva Nayakkar's house. His uncle is given only ragi morning and night. They are such wealthy people. But, poor man, he drinks only kuuzh,' Chittu said.

My mother commented, 'He's an invalid, tha, that's why he drinks it.'

Devi pounced on this. 'You listen to that, Amma. So, in that case we must be invalids too. That's why we are drinking kuuzh night and day. And it's because we drink this dark-coloured stuff that our children are born coal-black in colour, just like crows. Look at those upper-caste children, they are all pink and white. Some of them are so fair, they look as if they might bleed if you so much as touched them. And do you know why? It's because they eat milk and rice.'

She had barely finished speaking when Rendupalli, who was sitting on top of the chicken coop, chipped in. 'Ei, go on, di. You silly donkey, even if our children are dark-skinned, their features are good and there's a liveliness about them. Black is strongest and best, like a diamond. Just go to their streets and look about you. Yes, they might have light skins, but just take a close look at their faces. Their features are all crooked and all over the place, inside out and upside down. If they had our colour as well, not even a donkey would turn and look at them.'

I thought to myself that Rendupalli was probably right. By the way, Rendupalli's two front teeth stuck out; hence her name.

Chittu poured some more ragi into the pit of the grindstone and complained about her daughter. 'This girl is always the same. She talks as if the upper-caste women are all beautiful, like Rambhas stepping down from the heavens. As if she knows anything about it! As if a donkey would recognize the scent of camphor! Always the wretch must put down her own community.'

Rendupalli said again, 'Ei, didn't you go to school up to the fourth class, di? You should use your brains and think a bit, di. Ask these upper-caste women to do the work that we do—to transplant paddy in the wet

fields, to do the weeding, to reap the grain and carry it home. You'll see soon enough. They'll give it up in no time and go and lie down. It's not a big deal just to be drinking kanji and dressing oneself up all day.' She opened her snuff pouch and helped herself.

Devi didn't say any more. Her mother, though, went on talking to herself as she turned the pestle round and round. 'In other streets they grieve if a girl is born, as if it's a funeral or something. Because they have to give big dowries and bear all the cost when they get a girl married. They say a girl means expense and a boy means income. In some places they say, if a girl is born, the cruel parents will even kill the infant without any mercy or compassion.'

'At least we don't have such customs,' I said. 'Whether it's a boy or a girl, parents in our community accept the child and bring it up as best they can. When they are grown up, both sexes go to work and earn a livelihood. So why should boys be valued more?'

'True, Akka,' Devi agreed. Then she took a handful of the flour her mother had just ground and popped it into her mouth.

Seeing this, Chittu was triumphant. 'Do you see this, tha? The very same wretch who was so contemptuous of ragi can't keep off even the raw flour.' Then she gathered up all the flour into her box, put away the grindstone into its corner, and went home.

Every Saturday evening we used to go together to bathe in the well in the fields. At the same time we used to take our dirty clothes, wash them, dry them out, and bring them home. It was all in preparation of going to the church for the puusai on Sunday morning. So that was the one day in the week that we bathed. For us even a bath was like a special luxury. On most days, the women worked in the hot sun and then came home in the evenings to their housework, so they never had time to bathe in the well.

When we went there to bathe, we dived into the water, jumping from the room above where the pump-set was, and making a great splash. Then we swam about. When we were children, we all swam together

making no difference between the boys and the girls. We swam under water and played games, chasing and catching each other. After we came of age, we women bathed separately.

It was only women from the palla, paraiya, and chakkili communities who bathed there. We never felt shy with each other, nor thought we were being immodest. We stripped off our clothes casually and went into the water. On that one day we washed our faces with that much turmeric.

Once, about ten or twelve of us were bathing in Raasa Nayakkar's well. There were four or five small children with us, too. I asked the rest, 'The women from the other communities never come and swim here. Why is that?'

Othadipillai, who was already swimming in the water said, 'But none of them know how to swim. And not only that, those people won't bathe naked like this in front of each other. They always keep themselves under wraps as if their bodies are somehow different from ours.'

Kanniamma rebuked her. 'You are a wicked old cunt. You are always going on about equal places for men and women. But how is it likely that those ladies will come and bathe in a well which lower castes use?'

Othadi retorted, 'Ei, are all of us who bathe here shit-eating pigs, or what? In any case, who's stopping them from going and bathing at a different well?'

'They are all scaredy-cats, di. They can't swim at all, that's the truth. They stay at home, get a couple of buckets of water which they dip into and pour over themselves little by little. God knows how they manage to bathe in such small, small amounts of water. How different it is to go right under the water like this!' Purnam jumped in with a loud splash.

Then Kovaalu Paatti who was cutting the grass along the edge of the well pointed out something else. She said, 'There's no space in our houses to have a bath. Where can we go and bathe, we who live in tiny huts where we cook, eat, curl up and sleep in the same small space? Leave that. Even when we have our babies, where's the space to heat up a bit of water and pour it over ourselves? That's why we always come to the well. In those ladies' houses they've built different, different rooms to bathe, to shit or piss, and do whatever they like. So why should they come here?'

But Purnam would not agree. 'Is that what you think, Kizhavi? But do they have the freedom to come and jump into the water and swim about as we do? They never get all this fun. God knows how they can stay indoors all twenty-four hours of the day, gazing at the walls. I certainly couldn't do it, thaaye.'

We finished bathing, gathered up our dry clothes, dressed ourselves, and set off home. On our way back, Othadi asked, 'Have you people heard the tale of how Sammuga Kizhavi got into trouble when she was bathing in a well?'

'Where was she bathing?'

'She's a proud one. She claimed that the wells in these parts are useless, and went to Sinivasa Ayya's well just by the roadside, and bathed there—all by herself, too. He had already put a barbed-wire fence around that well to stop lower-caste donkeys from going there and polluting the water.'

'So how did she manage to get in?'

'You know that Sammuga Kizhavi; she's a stubborn old thing. It seems this happened when she was a young woman; my mother told me. It seems she asked why this man should keep his grand well all to himself, pulled away the barbed wire, jumped in, and swam about. It seems she did this several times. They say that he who gets away with theft for many days will surely get caught in the end. It was like that. Finally one day when she was bathing there, the landlord ayya found her out.'

'So he caught her red-handed!'

'He caught her red-handed, and abused her roundly. But she answered bold as anything, "Ayya, the water in your well is not at all good. It's all salty." And right in front of him she spat out a mouthful of water into the well. Then she came out and changed her clothes. He couldn't even approach her because she was standing there half-naked. So he went straight into the village and complained to the naattaamai. And then the naattaamai summoned her and gave it to her good and proper. After that she was really angry, it seems. A couple of months later, some of the women went to his fields to harvest the groundnut crop. Sammuga Kizhavi went along with them. And guess what she did?'

'What did she do?'

'That ayya had brought a small pot of drinking water for himself. One of the children from our streets went and touched it by mistake, so the ayya picked up some young groundnut stalks and beat up the child cruelly. She watched this and said, "The wretched man is beating up that innocent child just because her hand brushed against his water pot. See what I'm going to do to him." And she pissed into the pot when he wasn't there.'

All of us laughed when we heard this.

'Not only did she do that, she went into the village and said to everyone, "He said that the water in the well was contaminated because a paraichi swam in it. Now let the evil fellow drink my piss." And she went about abusing him and calling him names.'

When I reached home, I asked my mother, 'Amma, is it true that Sammuga Kizhavi pissed into the landlord's drinking water when she was a young woman?'

'That's what she went about saying. Who knows whether it's a fib or a true story? But she certainly is the kind of person who could have done it.'

I thought to myself it might be a good thing if we had even a handful of people with Sammuga Kizhavi's guts. Once in a blue moon, one or other of us dares to be defiant like this. But in most cases, our people's lives wilt and shrivel up because of their pain and suffering. Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings; shame and humiliation. If we had a little schooling at least, we could live with rather more awareness. When they humiliate us we do get furious and frustrated. But whatever our feelings, we have to suppress them.

Once when we were shelling groundnuts, we girls discussed this among ourselves. Subbamma said, 'Because we haven't been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die. As if we are blind, even though we have eyes. That is why any old dog will make a grab at us when we are working in the fields. But it's only by struggling like this that we can eat; otherwise we have to starve, that's all.'

Sothipillai joined in, shouting angrily, 'Just look at what goes on in

our church as well. It is our women who sweep the church and keep it clean. Women from other castes stand to one side until we've finished and then march in grandly and sit down before anyone else. I've stood it as long as I could, and at last I went and complained to the nuns. And do you know what they said? It seems we will gain merit by sweeping the church and that God will bless us specially. See how they fool us in the name of God! Why, don't those people need God's blessing too?'

Then Chinnamma Kizhavi said, 'What's the use of shouting until your whatsit hurts! If you had bothered to study a bit, you too could have gone about in style. You'd have gained respect.'

'It's all because of you older people. You never learnt anything and you prevented us from learning anything either. If ever I marry and have children, I'll make sure they study well and come to the top. You just see if I don't—if you are still alive to see it, that is.'

'I'll surely live to see it. Anyway, I'm going now to collect dry thorns and twigs. You girls give me a shout when you are ready to go home.'

Saletha wiped the sweat that was streaming down her face with her sari's edge and stopped shelling for a while. 'You talk big about having children and educating them, have you watched the girls from our paraiya community who've studied a bit? They go about as if they are upper-caste women who have jumped down from the sky. They won't mix with us anymore; it's like water and oil. They are afraid even to call themselves paraichis....' She tailed off and then bent down again to shell the groundnuts.

Punjolai said, 'But it seems what they teach is really of no use to us. Our lessons go one way, our lives go another way. There's really no connection at all between the two. Of course, we can learn to read and write. We could show a certificate, and earn a few rupees. But they say there's a big demand for the few jobs that are going.'

Later, when I finished my studies and began to look for jobs, I realized that even with an education one has to face many difficulties when trying to earn a livelihood. Being a Dalit creates a problem. On top of

that, being a Dalit woman makes it more difficult. The biggest problem of all, I realized, is trying to live alone as an unmarried Dalit woman.

I wanted to rent a small house thinking it would be convenient for me to live there on my own, fending for myself, and going to work every day. But it isn't such an easy thing to live alone like this, as an unmarried woman. The owners of the house and the neighbours around pestered me with hundreds of questions and tore me to shreds.

They questioned me about my village, my name, my parents, and my brothers and sisters. Endless questions about my job, my property, my jewels, and each one of my belongings. I could never be at peace, thinking, 'All right, I have somehow managed to answer all their questions.'

Because there was bound to be another spate of questions. What caste are you? What's your religion? Where do you work? How much do you earn? How old are you? Are you married? Why haven't you married yet? Are you going to marry at all? Why not? They will keep on pestering away like this.

If ever I couldn't stand it any more and showed my irritation even a tiny bit, then that was the end. At once they would mutter, 'Put a bridle through her nose and see if everything doesn't sort itself out.' When they say nose-bridle, they mean a marriage tali. It's quite a give-away, isn't it? They mean that women are like cattle that need taming. And it is women themselves who often claim that if we are to be kept in check, then men must put talis round our necks.

However well one can fend off all the other questions, there can be no getting round this question of caste. If I answer straight out that I am a paraichi, they will not let me rent their house. They make it really difficult, however much I am willing to pay.

These days, it is as hard to find lodgings as it is to find employment. People hesitate to rent houses to Dalits. And are we ourselves in a position to build houses and let them out to people of our community? There might, very occasionally, be one or two who are able to do it. If I consider all this and decide to hide the truth just for the sake of that house, I know I could never keep up that strategy for long. I often get angry enough

to shout it out aloud: I am a paraichi; yes I am a paraichi. And I don't like to hide my identity and pretend I belong to a different caste. The question beats away in my mind: why should I tell a lie and live a false life? Women of other castes don't face this problem. They can move where they choose, take a house, set up a livelihood. But we are denied the basic right to pay our money and rent a house. Are we so despicable to these others?

Besides all this, to live a life as an unmarried woman raises another huge problem. Because I have remained unmarried all this time, people assume that I have known many men as a prostitute; they gossip about me. They seem to think that once a woman is married and has a tali round her neck, she is also signed, sealed, and delivered over to one man. They assume that otherwise she is the common property of many fellows, and they will leer at her suggestively. Why? Why shouldn't a woman belong to no one at all but herself?

It is the same at the place where I work. If I only go to a café on my own and order a cup of coffee, they will say, 'This one is really crazy.' Why this? Because I rent a house on my own and live by myself, they mutter, 'Is she a woman? Look at the way she rents herself a house and goes about as she pleases like a man!'

And do you think it is just men who talk like this? Women gossip just as much if not more. Even women teachers who are my colleagues find my lifestyle unbearable. They keep a sharp watch on whatever I do, and spread tales in no time, embroidering and adding whatever they like to imagine.

But I go about with enough courage. It's only when your purse is heavy that you fear the journey, as they say. You have to tell yourself the dog is barking at the sun; that's all.

Often, when my work is done for the day, I sit at home, thinking about all this, over and over again. 'I have to struggle so hard because I m a woman. And exactly like that, my people are punished constantly for the simple fact of having been born as Dalits. Is it our fault that we are Dalits? On top of that, just because I am a woman, I have to battle

specially hard. Not only do I have to struggle against men, I have to also bear the insults from women of other castes. From how many directions must the blows come! And for how long!'

But even though I think and agonize like this, I know that my own situation is not so bad. Somehow, I have a little education, I earn a living, and stand on my own two feet. But when I think of the women from my community who can't tell 'a' from 'aa', and bend low to receive endless blows at home and at work, I am filled with frustration.

When everything is added up and calculated, it seems to me that society is arranged as if God created women only for the convenience of men. In daily practice, women have to make sure that men don't suffer discomfort, that they are consoled and comforted, all their needs looked after, and all their bodily hungers satisfied. In short, they must be conscious every minute of their day that men are at the very centre of their lives.

But women have minds of their own, too. They have their own desires and wishes. Nobody seems to reflect on women's bodily hungers and needs. Women are told never to reveal these things. They have written it into our foreheads that we must repress and destroy our own needs and feelings, and run about looking after the men and the rest of the family. And we too have believed all this, and prattle on that 'one's husband is one's manifest God'.

Men can humiliate us a thousand times, speak about us with disrespect, and act towards us in that way too. And that is accepted as normal. But let a woman be outspoken just once—just one single time—let her act just once with self-respect. He will never stand for it. Until he has beaten her, broken her spirit, and gained control over her, he won't even digest his kanji. If a woman has gone beyond his controlling hand, his very moustache will begin to twitch. And if we become terrified and give in, then we have to live and die like beasts of burden.

Knowing all this, as we do, we must not live like people who choose to be blind though they can see. If we ourselves do not change our condition, then who will come and change it for us?

We must give up the belief that a married life of complete service to a man is our only fate. We must change this attitude that if married life

turns out to be a perpetual hell, we must still grit our teeth and endure it for a lifetime. We must bring up our girls to think in these new ways from an early age. We should educate boys and girls alike, showing no difference between them as they grow into adults. We should give our girls the freedom we give our boys. If we rear our children like this from the time they are babies, women will reveal their strength. Then there will come a day when men and women will live as one, with no difference between them; with equal rights. Then injustices, violence, and inequalities will come to an end, and the saying will come true that 'Women can make and women can break'.

I am hopeful that such a time will come soon.

GLOSSARY

andas : large cauldrons
anna : elder brother
athai : father's sister
Ayyankaachi : ghosts/spirits who appear in groups
chakkili or chakkiliyar : caste name
chattai : blouse or shirt
chavadi : marketplace
chellaangucchi : games played in villages
cholam : millet
devani : a half sari made up of a veil, blouse and skirt
gundas : rowdies
Iyyar : Iyer, a Brahmin
jallikattu : a sport in which participants attempt to gain control over racing bulls
kabadi : games played in village
Kali kaalam : an era when evil-doing abounds
Kanji : thin gruel of rice or other grains or just the starchy water drained from cooked rice
kilaikkal : a fruit
kizhavi : literally, an old lady, often used in conjunction with a name
kodangi : an instrument used to attract attention before an announcement is made

kuchulu : a little hut built away from the household. When a girl comes of age, she is made to sit in this 'hut' where she is visited by friends and relatives

Kulavai : the ululating sound made by women on auspicious occasions

kummis : folk dances by women, accompanied by clapping

kunkumam : red powder, used to make a mark on the forehead as a sign of auspiciousness

kuzhambu : meat or vegetables, cooked in a gravy, to be eaten with rice, etc.

macchaan : marriageable cousin, i.e. the son of maternal uncle or paternal aunt

madani : brother's wife

mai : eye darkener, kohl

maistri : contractor

mantram : same as mantra

moi : monetary gift given at a wedding

mocchai payiru : a gram

mudalaali : employer, proprietor

mundé : abusive reference to a widow

muni : bad spirit

Nalla kaariyam : an auspicious event

oppaari : dirge

paatti : grandmother

paampadam : heavy ear ornaments worn by rural women

pallar : caste name

paraichi : a woman of the paraiya caste

parisam : monetary gift given by the groom's parents to the bride

Perimma : senior aunt

Pongal : harvest festival of Tamil Nadu

poochandi : bogey man

pottu : bindi, a decorative mark on the woman's forehead

pushpavati : coming of age of a girl, literally, the day a girl blossoms

pujaari : priest
puusai : (puujai) in this context, a catholic mass
ragi-kuuzh : gruel made of ragi
ragi kali : millet flour, given at a wedding
ravikkai : sari blouse
roraaathu : lullaby
saamiyaar : clergyman, parish priest
siir : betrothal gifts
sorakkai : gourd
tali-tying : central rite in the wedding ceremony. It has the same significance for Christians as for Hindus
Thai : tenth month in the Tamil calendar, mid-January to mid-February
Thai-pongal : paddy-harvest celebration held on the first day of the month of Thai
thaatha : grandfather
thaayam : games
thaaye : a way of addressing woman
thambi : younger brother
thattaangal : games
thinnai : a cement seat built just outside the entrance to a house
Vaiyaasi : (Vaikasi) second month in the Tamil calendar, mid-May to mid-June
vanaan : washerman
vetti : (veshti) a garment worn by men, wrapped around the waist and falling on the ankle